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Mrityunjaya

The Death Conqueror

The Story of Karna

by Shivaji Sawant

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SHIVAJI SAWANT

Shivaji Sawant was born in Maharashtra in 1940 and educated in Poona University *Mrityunjaya* has appeared in over ten Marathi editions and ten editions in its Hindi version, it is now being translated into Kannada, Malayalam and Gujarati He has taught in the Rajaram High School in Kolhapur, and edited the magazine *Lokashiksha* He is the recepient of numberous literary awards and honours, including the *Maharajaya Puraskar (1968 1969) and the Lalita Masik Patrika* (Bombay) Puraskar (1986) He lives in Poona

THE TRANSLATORS

Nandini Nopany lives *in Calcutta She has translated (with P Lal) Twentyfour Stories* by *Premchand A Premchand Dozen,* and *Bharatiya Nari* (Stories in Hindi by Indian Women) Her interests include photography, calligraphy, and miniature ivory painting

P Lal lives in Calcutta *He teaches* English in *St* Xavier's College *Has published over 40 books of poetry, literary, criticism, and translations* from Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit Awarded the Padma Shri in 1972 Currently working on a sloka by sloka English transcreation of the Mahabharata of Vyasa Married, with a son and a daughter

TRANSLATORS' PREFACE

The concept of tragedy, in the strict sense of the term, is not a part of the Indian literary tradition The basic Indian belief is that man's past karma determines his joys or sorrows in this life As a result there can be no punishment in excess Tragedy however is built on the principle of disproportionate punishment—the tragic hero always seems to suffer more than he deserves, though he does so nobly

Probably the only major character in Indian literature who comes closest to being a tragic hero is Karna, the flesh-ear-ringed and skin armoured son of virginal Kunti by the sun god Surya Karna has a sympathetic appeal in the popular Indian imagination, yet when he is presented on stage or screen, he somehow does not seem to get the credit he deserves He emerges as less than an inspiring figure, and sometimes even as a character stained by meanness and vindictiveness This is very far from the popular image of Karna—an image which only Rabindranath Tagore succeeded in portraying in his dramatic poem "Karna Kunti Samvad

Shivaji Sawant takes up Karna and gives him the full dimensions of a truly tragic hero In this best-selling novel written originally in Marathi he embroiders on the sketchy outline of Karna in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and produces an impressive flesh and blood personality A tragic hero invariably comes to ruin because of one over riding moral flaw We leave it to the reader to discover what the flaw of the eldest of the Pandavas could have been What makes this almost perfect protagonist suffer and die in such an unholy manner?

We have translated, with Shri Sawant s permission from the excellent Hindi version (by Om Shivaraj) of the Marathi original of this contemporary classic We have tried to keep the rendering faithful to an extreme retaining the grace and lyricism Indian words included in Webster s Third New Internationl Dictionary are neither translated nor italicised certain untranslatable words with strong cultural roots and nuances have been left untranslated and are italicised such as *pranama pradakshina*, *yajna* *svayamvara* and guru *dakshina*

Calcutta

P LAL
NANDINI NOPANY

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BOOK 1

KARNA

1

I want to say something today Some will startle hearing my words And wonder *How can anyone swallowed by Death speak?* But a time comes when the dead have to speak too When the flesh-and-bones living behave like the dead, then the dead have to come alive and speak out Oh, I'm not going to say anything on behalf of others, because I know only too well I'm not so great a philosopher as to do anything like that The thing is the world was to me a battlefield And what was my role in the battlefield? That of a quiver full of arrows A quiver stuffed with all sizes and shapes of arrows, each with its own separate function Just a quiver—just that *one* kind of quiver

I am going to lay bare that quiver today and expose it to all present All its varied special shooting arrows—all the exactly alike ones—I am going to show them all, freely, of my own accord, with my own hands Some shining with celestial bands, some instantly alluring the eyes with their fierce, attractive shapes, some with pitiful shredded tails, and some looking weird with tattered bands—all these arrows—exactly as they are—I intend to put them on display for everyone today

I want to get them properly weighed on the scales of the world's heroism I want them evaluated by universal motherhood Each guru on earth must come forward and pinpoint for me the exact significance of each I want them examined by life-sacrificing friendship I want them assessed by closeness drenched in heart-warming filial fountains

From deep down—from somewhere in the deepest recesses of my heart—a voice keeps calling out to me The more I steel myself against it, the more it flares out, like a flame that a wind fans instead of extinguishing "Tell them all, Karna Tell them the story of your life Tell it to them openly so they ll understand, because that is the way nowadays The whole world says, 'Karna, your life was in tatters ' Go, tell them it wasn't tattered and torn, it was a rich gold-bordered royal silk garment Only—only it ripped into a thousand

flocks of deer scamper excitedly in my mind I have heard some say memories are like peacock feathers, others compare them to *vakula* blossoms that fade but leave behind their fragrance I don't think so I think memories are like elephant's foot-prints They make a deep, indelible impression on our moist mind At least, that's the way my memories have been Champanagari is one such deep memory a clear, timeless stamp on my barren life of the massive lord-elephant of Time It is the most peaceful and desirable resting-place in the pilgrimage of my life Some describe life as a temple I know only too well that my life never even vaguely resembled a temple But if it *has* to be compared to a temple, then Champanagari is the sweetest-tinkling bell in that temple

A small village in one corner of the holy Ganga What kind of village?

2

Creeper-covered, bird-and-beast-haunted such was Champanagari, my little village cradled in the lap of the goddess of Nature I passed my happy childhood in that village where *chatakas, chakoras*, kokilas, skylarks, *sarangas* and other song-birds woke me at dawn with their music, where every morning I performed my rituals and ablutions to the mooing of cows, where I rested under the thick shade of kadamba trees on incessantly sunny afternoons, where I returned home to the tinkling of bells on the necks of cows in the pious cowdust-hour of evening, where at night I slept quietly draping on my body the cool, soft breeze from the banks of the Ganga Yes, I spent my childhood here Then it sped away like a shot arrow, never to return

But I can instantly recall, if I so wish, the stretch of the Ganga touching the horizon What a vast kingdom of transparent-blue water! Each drop of that water knows me well, and I too know well each drop of that water This is the Ganga where soft wet sands received the imprint of my innocent boyish feet It is here that the mischievous gust of breeze flirted with my body's upper garment That is why, along with memories of Champa village, my boyhood memories of Ganga mata, spreading from one end to the other, also spring in front of my eyes What is childhood, after all? Who has the right answer? So many have given so many definitions, but if you ask me, I think it's like a chariot A chariot that's pulled by free and

shreds in the entanglements of circumstances Whoever came across these shreds, made whatever use of them they wanted Why then are you so enamoured of your royal garment?"

Show them all today, clearly and finally—your royal dress that got shredded in the furious doom-dance of Kala was in no way less precious than brand-new seamless rolls of lavish fabrics stacked away in a lovely chest Stuff it well in their ears! Will your story succeed in shaking listeners in this crazy world who are attracted to tales of heroes one minute and the very next discard the tales with facile indifference? Does it have that gripping power?

They will all want to hear your story today—those who have firm faith in the reality of this world, those who treat Death as a toy, those lion-chested heroes whose existence is very much felt in this earth Ah, but is this a story only? It is actually a mighty truth Truth is least affected by those who see it and hear it Truth appears always as itself whenever it appears, it rises like the Sun-God himself

Whatever the story, all listeners expect from it the sweet intoxication of wine, the rhythmic footbeats of dancers, and the passionate embraces of lovers They want a thrill that ecstatically transports them away from life's brevity In my life-story, which I'm going to narrate, there is no such winy headiness No lilting feet-tappings to titillate the mind Only conflict Conflict that convulses the imagination

I'm just an ordinary soldier who knows how to fight as best as he can I'm telling the story of my life for one reason only—to make sense of it for myself No man's mind feels light until he tells his whole story out That's why I'm speaking out today, freely

The real problem before me today is how to tell my story in a logical and connected way? Because all the events of my life seem to be scattering helter-skelter in my mind instead of marching sequentially, they disperse like herds of wild horses galloping crazily when ear-splitting flashes of lightning crash in a forest How shall I bring order in their ranks? I don't know why, but one picture comes now in front of my eyes Champanagari on the enchanting, sacred bank of the Ganga The village of Champanagari was a beautiful curve in the flow of my life—one of my sweetest memories

Thoughts of that small place, and various warblings and chirpings, fill the forest of my memories, and my experiences like

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3

I and my younger brother Shon Our own little world! Shon! Yes, Shon! His full name was Shatruntapa, but everyone called him Shon I had another brother, Vrikrata But when still a little boy he went over to his mother's sister in the kingdom of Vikata That left the two of us Shon and me My childhood world was filled with memories of the two of us It was a wonderful miniscule world—of two boys growing up with their dreams in the sweet ethos of Champa village No pretences, no falsities, no petty jealousies A selfless little world of two brothers Two guards stood at the entrance our mother Radha, and our father Adhiratha Even today, when I think of them, the soft strings of my heart vibrate melodiously, and spontaneously, out of gratitude and affection, two tear-drops form in my eyes But only for a fleeting instant Quickly I wipe them away I know that tears betray weakness No tears have ever succeeded in extinguishing the flames of grief Yet until I can feel those two tear-drops, I don't get a feeling of relief It's true that apart from those tears I could never give my parents anything significant or precious And yet, what else is there worth giving to one's parents as a token of love? I don't think of such things My father and mother had no expectations from me All I received from them was love So, loaded with gratitude and moist with affection, these two tears that form in my eyes for my parents .

4

My mother was an ocean of affection In my childhood the people of the village called me Vasusena To my little brother Shon I was Vasu bhaiya Every day, hundreds of times, my mother called me "Vasu! Vasu!" Not only the milk of her breasts, but what I received from her was the continuing pure nectar of her love As if she was born for only one purpose to love all equally Champanagari

knew her as Radha-mata Her word was law—because she was impossibly tolerant and brimmingly loving I was born with flesh-ear-rings—and she was always discussing it with the village folk And how upset she would get if I escaped her eyes for even a moment! How disconsolate! Rush to her neighbours to look for me Seat me in front of her and stare, without reason, for hours, at my ear-rings, till she almost became transfixed Run her hands lovingly on my head and whisper "Vasu, don't you ever go near the Ganga—not even by mistake "

"Why?" I would ask

"You must listen to your elders When you're told not to go, you don't go "

"You're such a coward, mother What's going to happen if I go?"

"No, Vasu " She would pull me towards her and, rippling her long fingers through my hair, ask, "Vasu, you love me or no?"

"Uh-huh " I'd shake my head

She'd look surprised at my nodding ear-rings "Then listen to me, and don't go near the Ganga," and she'd press me hard to her A strange fear seemed to be swimming in her eyes

I'd placate her by saying, "All right If you don't want me to go, I won't Satisfied?"

And then she'd hug me in a deep motherly embrace She'd start kissing non-stop my head and ears, one after the other And all I wanted then was to be in her embrace forever

Cuddled in her lap I'd think Why is mother so afraid of the Ganga? And I so loved Ganga-mata! How I longed to sit and talk to her countless lapping waves! I knew no greater pleasure Sup posing mother were to find out? She would surely turn up near the Ganga during one of her rounds of searching for me Nevertheless, catch me giving up going to the Ganga! But naturally, I'd have to see that mother never got to know I'd make up my mind, and then go about gathering fistfuls of yellow *vakula* and *sopia* flowers to present to Shon, to bribe him into silence

5

My father was the chief of charioteers in the pâlace of Dhritarashtra king of the Kauravas He spent most of his time in

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was that I didn't always have the answers

I put off answering sometimes, because I knew he had a volley of additional questions to fire at me And, in any case, the truth was that I didn't always have the answers

"Come, we're very late " With these words I tried to divert his mind

By the time we got back, it was evening, and we would see flocks of eagles, kokilas, pigeons, quail, *patrarathas* and red sheldrakes clamorously returning to their nests Craning his neck out of the chariot-frame, Shon would look at the flying swarms and again shoot questions at me But I wasn't paying attention to him at that time The Sun-God was beginning his descent in the stately, lofty western mountains Even after their non-stop gallop all day long, his chariot's steeds had not tired The two massive hills appeared to me to be two door-guards of the palace of the sun Gazing at the flaming orb stirred a mysterious unease in my heart, I don't know why In a matter of seconds that glowing ball of fire would vanish from my line of vision—the very thought of the sun's absence sent inexplicable ripples flashing all over my body I stared intently at the red disc Shon would jerk me back to reality, and point to a cacophonous crowd of vultures speeding across the sky Briefly I would stare at those huge-bodied wild feathered creatures, soaring far above the other birds

Shon would ask, "What birds are these, bhaiya?"

"*Garudas* The king of birds "

"Bhaiya, will you rise as high as these *garudas* ?" he'd ask casually

"Silly! Am I a bird or what? How do you expect me to fly so high?"

"All right, you're not a bird! Tell me, how were you able to control those speeding horses? "

"Achcha bhai, I'll rise as high as the *garudas* So high you won't be able to see me Satisfied?" He seemed to be A tender, respectful look for me sparkled in his eyes

I gazed again at the western horizon, and ultimately I asked him, "See that sun-ball, Shon? Tell me how you feel about it "

It seemed to me that, after gazing briefly but intently at the sun, he would express feelings identical to mine But no sooner had he started staring sunward than his little baby eyes closed tight because of the glare, a little later, blinking, he said to me hurriedly, looking at my ears, "I think he looks like your face, Vasu bhaiya "

the faraway Kaurava capital Hastinapura Now and then he would drive down to Champanagari in a huge chariot What excitement for me and Shon! The instant it halted in front of our leaf-thatched home, Shon would leap inside the chariot, snatch the reins from father's hands, and shout, "Vasu-bhaiya, hurry! Let's go get shells from the Ganga " I would dash out, leaving behind my delicious food

Seated in father's chariot, we flew like the wind to the bank of the Ganga, beyond the town limits The five cream-coloured horses, tail-tufts upraised, ears erect, galloped swiftly Controlling them was a headache for young Shon Biting his lower lip hard, he tried in vain swerving them smoothly around corners, and in tired desperation he sought my help The reins left graze-marks on his hands His voice became so gentle then that I felt a powerful tug of affection for him I took the reins from his hands Reversing the whip, he used it to play with the horses' manes "Hah! Hah!" he yelled, urging them faster with the whip, till they obliged with spurts of speed Achieving his wish, he clapped his hands frantically as if to enthuse me too And then, before we even knew it, we had arrived at the bank of the Ganga, just a mile or two away In a flash, Shon sped like a deer to the riverside, imprinting his small footmarks in the wet sand I stayed where I was, as if my hands and feet had become numb, and I kept staring fixedly in the direction of the water It seemed to me, for no reason, that there was a bond between me and the water—an indissoluble bond And then came a second thought *Chhee ! What does water have to do with a man? It's only a temporary quencher of human thirst, that's all* The reins slipped from my hands, I did not know when I drank in the scene with my small eyes And it struck me then—How wonderful if I were to have eyes, and only eyes, all over my body !

Shon's questioning snapped me out of my reverie The discovery of so many vari-coloured shells made him walk as if on air He showered me with queries "Bhaiya, how are shells made? From water no?

"Yes '

But that didn't satisfy him Another query "You mean all these colours are made by water?"

Yes

Why don't we see these colours in the water then?"

I put off answering sometimes, because I knew he had a volley of additional questions to fire at me And, in any case, the truth

brought and placed in our simple abode. I don't know why, but the first time I laid eyes on a bow I felt strangely attracted to it—more than a strange, a *wonderful* fascination. The pigeon-necked curve of the shaft, the bow-string that twanged at the touch of a finger nail—these fascinated me. I had, you might say, appropriated the bow from father. I whirled it in my hands, and frisked off to the courtyard to meet Shon, flicking a horse's tail with it as I ran. He was busy removing the shiny long hairs from the tail. He was humming. I showed him the bow and said, "Shon, look at this toy of ours. Stop plucking horse-hairs, Shon. Now we have a new game to play."

He threw aside the hairs in his hand. "Show! Show!" he shouted and ran eagerly towards me. Taking the bow from my hands, he said, his eyes growing large, "Heavy, isn't it?"

"Don't be silly! *This*—heavy? Here, let me have it. And get me an arrow." I sent him on the errand.

Shouting "An arrow for bhaiya! An arrow for bhaiya!" he ran inside.

With my upper garment I carefully wiped the bow of dust. I balanced it in my hand, trying to guess its weight. Shon bounded in, carrying an arrow. He handed the arrow to me and, pointing to a massive banyan in front, he said, "Bhaiya, shoot at that tree."

I swiftly fitted the arrow and pulled the bowstring taut. Aiming straight, steadying my hand, I closed my left eye and released the arrow. Straight-flying like a hawk, the arrow sped smoothly to its target, and embedded itself in the trunk—*kchchch*! A milky sap trickled down the bark. Shon leapt up and down, clapping in joy. My aim delighted him no end.

From that day on this became a regular game for Shon and me. Making a bull's-eye target of a hawk circling high up in the sky, slicing off young mango shoots on branches swaying gently in the breeze, firing two arrows simultaneously and hitting two separate objects—we played these and many other games for hours on end. Our father was judge at all these sports. Whatever he decided, we accepted with bowed heads. But I had always one idea uppermost in my mind. I wanted to know the ins-and-outs of archery. Aiming at an invisible target by sound only, was a skill I desired specially to learn. Like a porcupine releasing hundreds of quills in self-defence, I wanted to learn how to shoot countless arrows simultaneously.

I touched my ears and felt the two lobes of my flesh-ear-rings. Word was I was born with them.

Shon would start complaining, "How mother loves you! More than me. Bhaiya, see, that's why she's given you these ear-rings. I have no flesh-ear-rings."

The way he expressed his innermost feelings made me pensive. I gazed intently at the disappearing orb of the westward-setting sun. A storm of feelings raced through my boy's mind. Steadying the reins in one hand, avoiding Shon's gaze, I waved farewell to the vanishing sun with the other. A funny kind of restlessness overpowered me, as if something close was slipping away from me, slipping far, far away. On an impulse I lashed the whip on the horses' backs. Their hooves kicked up dust as they galloped like the wind, neighing loudly. Shon beside me, the galloping horses, the trees flashing past—*ashoka*, date-palm, *kimshuk*, mahua, trumpet-flower, black catechu, kadamba, sal, seven-leaf, and tall thick-leaved others—I wasn't aware of any of them. Only the road fleeing backwards, its twists and turns—I noticed only these. A thought flashed lightning-like. *I am getting dragged, dragged backward like the road, from the realm of radiance into a dreadful welter of darkness.* It seemed to me that all my twelve nocturnal hours would be spent in aloneness.

Back in Parnakuti, our thatched-leaf-hut, Shon excitedly spread out and displayed his collection of multi-coloured shells before mother. She praised him and asked me, "What about you, Vasu? What have you brought?" This flustered me, for the moment I had nothing to say. The reason was I never did bring anything. Cautiously I replied, "I have brought Shon home, mother. Isn't that enough? Or he'd have sat on the bank and gathered shells all night."

"Oh, is that so! *You* brought me? *I* brought *him*, that's what—or he'd have stayed back there, waiting for the sun to return at dawn." Shon nodded his head while presenting his case. Mother looked intently at me. Why so intently, I could not make out. I left the room and went outside.

6

There were any number of different-shaped bows that father had

antlers. I casually put my hands on my ears and felt my flesh-ear-rings. *Do I also look as special and imposing as that stag?* I asked myself.

Time and again I had probingly questioned mother about my ear-rings. She was unable to give me any satisfactory explanation. Once I asked her bluntly, "Aren't Shon and I brothers? Why doesn't he have flesh-ear-rings also?" She glanced fearfully at my flesh-ear-rings and kept silent. Composing herself, she said, "Don't ask me. Ask your father." Her face filled with anxiety when she said this.

I approached father and put the same question. He gave me a very strange answer. "Ask Mother Ganga," he said. "If you get any answer at all, you'll get it from her."

I was lost in thought. How could Ganga-mata give an answer to that? Could a river speak? Oh, these weird elders and their ways! Why do they have to talk to young ones in that way?

That evening, avoiding everyone, I made my solitary way to the bank of Ganga-mata. Sitting there, I asked each rippling wave: *Why am I the only one with flesh-ear-rings*? Not a single wave replied. That day it seemed to me that all the world's elders were cheats. Their only aim was to keep young people in the dark—or why should even the revered elderly Ganga-mata also keep silent?

Next evening, while practising archery, I asked Shon the same question. "Tell me, Shon, and tell me true, why don't you have flesh-ear-rings?" His reply astounded me. "I don't know," he said, "but I'll tell you this: I just love your ear-rings! When you are sleeping at night, they glitter like stars. Their soft-blue glow lights up your pink cheeks."

I gaped at him. He wasn't lying, and I knew anyway he wouldn't lie to me. A host of questions flooded my mind. I had flesh-ear-rings that *no* one else had! Glittering ear-rings. Why were they given *only* to me? Who was I? I shook Shon by his shoulders and asked, "Shon, who am I?"

He gazed his heart's fill on my trembling ear-rings and said innocently, "Vasu-bhaiya, my elder brother."

I released his shoulders. His reply did not solve my problem. I gazed in front of me. The resplendent sun had splashed the vast sky with countless colours; it was slowly becoming invisible; and in my mind the relentless curiosity about my ear-rings deepened.

7

Who knows what dreams really signify? To me it seems they are wish-fulfilments of suppressed desires, for that night I dreamt of dancing bows Flower-decorated bows with curved designs, strong yet flexible bows—one by one I held them in my hands Whatever object I sighted became the target of my unwavering aim Delighted with the accuracy of my shooting, I clapped my own praise—and woke up, still clapping

One morning Shon and I went to the forest near the town to collect the tough and durable acacia wood used in the making of chariots Shon was in high spirits that day Nothing pleased him more than a chance to stroll in the forest The sweet varied warblings of the birds, the rustling of tree branches, the splashing of waterfalls, the susurrus of creepers twining round massive-bodied tree trunks—these fascinated Shon He could go on tirelessly describing them for hours I wasn't that keen about going into the forest, because not a glimmer of the Sun-God's rays penetrated there I would become inexplicably apprehensive, inexplicably suffocated, and try to leave as quickly as possible Only when I emerged into the open did I experience a small sense of relief The darshan of the Sun-God sufficed to instantly dispel my weariness

We returned that day, as was our practice, with the acacia wood I speeded up my gait in order to get out of the forest quickly Shon was following me I halted near a clearing He caught up with me Leaning his load of wood against a tree, he wiped the sweat off his face In front, in scattered clumps, grew reeds A herd of white cows and dark buffaloes was grazing in that reedy swamp A stag had got mixed up in that herd He stared in our direction with his elegant antlers held high This was good enough reason for Shon to fire a question Instantly he asked me, "Bhaiya, how did this stag get mixed up with this herd?' What could I reply to that? I had to say something, so I answered, "Must have strayed in Or could be his herd companions have abandoned him But doesn't he look glorious all by himself among all those cattle?" I kept wondering why he should happen to be there all by himself and, try however hard and long I could, I was unable to come up with a plausible explanation

Keeping the stag in sight, we moved ahead I was fascinated by his

rings! They shone gently in the deep mirror of the Ganga As the waves rolled, they seemed to elongate themselves I stared intently at my face's reflection Two flesh-ear-rings throwing a bluish circular glow .. A blurred glow that reflected my face My ear-rings glowed at night—this secret I learnt from Ganga-mata But why glowing ear-rings for me only? Who was I? Who?

I stood in the waters One doubt was cleared But the second remained "Why these glowing ear-rings for me only?" I stood still in the water for over three hours At dawn I heard the temple bell and remembered my thatched hut Mother must be worried seeing me absent I decided to return quickly even as the dark shades scattered in the east Merged in the kingdom of darkness, the vast receptacle of Ganga-mata again seemed to join hands with the encompassing blue sky Just as after a first burst of rain, from out the lap of mother earth, slowly, a seed sprouts, so, from the womb of Ganga-mata, in the distance, the Sun God emerged I looked at him I felt at peace Almost unconsciously I scooped water in my cupped palm With closed eyes, I slowly offered the *arghya*-water to the Sun, and returned home

The night-blurred path was now clearing Champanagari, which was in the night like an inner shrine of a temple, now opened like a flag fluttering atop the temple Mother asked, "Where did you go?" She looked upset

"To the bank of Ganga-mata You never told me, but Ganga-mata did—she showed me how my ear-rings glowed "

Mother looked at me with extreme fear The same strange fear with which she sometimes looked at me She wanted to ask something more from me To avoid the question, I quickly dashed outside

9

In front of Parnakuti was a huge banyan It wasn't a tree—it was a bird-city populated by myriad-coloured and myriad voiced birds When tiny red fruit loaded the banyan in summer, it seemed that countless twinkling stars had spangled a tree sky And the delight that filled the bird-denizens then! Their varied chirpings could only be ways of communicating their joy to each other For hours I would listen to their warbling, oblivious to myself I wanted so much to be like that tree! I wanted birds to delight in the fruits that would grow

8

Try however hard I did, I wasn't able to sleep that night. Curiosity is like a restless horse Pull in the reins of your thoughts as much as you like, it keeps galloping ahead I tossed this side and that One question kept dancing in front of my eyes; *Why these ear-rings? Why on my ears? I am told they glint at night. What kind of glinting? Why?* I jerked up on my bed. From the side of my eyes I tried vainly to see if the ear-rings realy did glint My ears refused to come within the range of my vision I became impatient How would I be able to see my own ears? I kept wondering about this for a long time It was all so puzzling. For a moment I thought I should wake Shon and ask him if my ear-rings were really glinting or not But he was deep in peaceful slumber in mother's lap Waking him would mean waking her as well Father was away in Hastinapura What on earth was I to do? Suddenly I recalled Father's words "Ganga-mata will answer your question some day " Silently I crept out of bed Fearfully I opened the door of the hut and made my way to Ganga-mata. The sky sparkled with white, bright, tightly-packed stars Shon did say once, "Your ear-rings shine like stars " So I stared intently at the stars, trying to divine their special dazzle It wasn't satisfactory. Plantain tree leaves rustled incessantly Champanagari was as silent and tranquil as the inner shrine of a temple Occasionally there was the noise of neighing from a nearby stable The faint, hazy starlight made the road in front of me a blur I hurried my steps Cool gusts of breeze caressed my body I had forgotten to bring my upper garment along. After a long time I reached the river bank Daytime's gigantic receptacle of leaping waters was at night a profound contiguous gentleness Daytime's vast receptacle that seemed to touch the horizon was humbled in the kingdom of Night Only the endless lapping of waves that tongued the sand pebbles .. The rhythmic beat deepened the silence of the place I stood transfixed, drinking in the music of that silence For a second I forgot that I had come to ask a question Lost in thought, I entered the enveloping waters of Ganga-mata The stars were reflected purely in the serene waters. Two stars shone with a special sparkle Occasionally a wave would roll up and lengthen the stellar reflection I bent low to scoop up water for the sacred *anjali* The two stars shone brigher. I lowered my face very close to the water The two stars were my ear-

10

One day all the children of the town were out on a plateau-like field, playing. One of them had the bright idea of playing "Kings and Courtiers". Aren't children the rishis who are the *real* creators? That day they bodied forth the reality of a royal court. The tough and hefty ones appropriated the respectable posts of treasurers, grooms, generals, ministers, advisers and others. Strange how they got to know all about the intrigues of court politics!

In the centre was a huge boulder, embedded in the earth. That became the Throne. Shon was playing General. I went to call him, because father had just returned from Hastinapura to the village. The minute he returned, he gave me a wonderfully happy piece of news: he would take me back with him to Hastinapura. He told me about a brilliantly learned, skilled-in-arms guru named Drona in Hastinapura, and he wanted me to train under him for war-combat. I immediately thought of Shon, but he was not in Parnakuti. I decided that I would tactfully pass on the news to him, because I was afraid that he might stubbornly insist that mother and father see that he accompanied me to Hastinapura. Persuading Shon was no easy job for any of us.

As soon as I reached the high ground, the boys began shouting, "Call Vasu! Call Vasu!" Shon joyfully lifted his hands and said loudly, "Vasu-bhaiya, come here, quick!" I rushed to him. They ringed me, screaming, and I couldn't for a second make out what they were saying. "Raja—Vasu—Ear-rings—General"—these and other strange words assailed my ears. I raised both hands, and finally I outshouted them: "Shut up!" The clamour quickly subsided.

"We've organised a Royal Court. We're missing a proper king. So we're going to make you king, because of your flesh-ear-rings," Brahmadatta said on behalf of all of them. They shouted approval.

"*Arre*! I've come to fetch Shon," I protested.

"Oh-o! No, not Shon. The General. And a Maharaja doesn't go to call a General. It's us attendants who are ordered to do such jobs," mischievous Bahuketu spoke up cleverly.

"And *you* are the General! Do you think it's right of you to call the Maharaja by his name? '*Arre*, Vasu, come here,' that's what you said. If the General himself breaks the rules, what can you expect

on me! And I wanted the king of birds, Garuda himself, who disdained perching on trees, to come and visit me Garuda, who ate only slithering snakes, would approach me and say haughtily, "*Chhee*! I wasn't born to peck at such soft fruit " And I would fold my leafy hands and beg him, "Lord of birds! Don't eat the fruit But stay and rest here for a while " He would relax briefly and, before soaring up high, gently pluck one small fruit Exhilarated by this placatory gesture of the king of birds, I would clap my countless leaf-hands in joy And the vines and creepers curling around me like upper garments would flap in the sky with ecstasy

I looked at the banyan It was shaped like a mace On top, a circular mass of branches, below, the strong trunk Suddenly I heard a noise—*khad*! I turned in its direction Our neighbour, the charioteer Bhagadatta, was flicking his whip I looked at him surprised He twined the whip round his neck and said, "What's wrong, Vasu? Why are you staring?"

"Nothing I was looking at the birds," I replied

"Birds on this banyan? If you really want to see birds, you should go to the forest and see the *ashoka* tree There's mostly crows on this banyan They're the only ones who relish over-ripe, rotten fruits " He flicked the whip handle at the fruits on the ground

"Crows?"

"Yes Larks, vultures, kokilas and other birds stray in here You do see a kokila or two come by, but only when seduced by a female "

"Seduced?" I asked curiously

"*Arre*, the kokila lays her egg secretly in the crow's nest The egg's shape and colour are exactly like a crow's egg The crow never once suspects there's some other egg in her nest She broods the kokila's egg And so, the musical enchanter of one and all is reared in the crow's nest " He curled the whip around his neck

"Kokila—in a crow's nest?" I gave the matter deep thought How could that happen? What proof was there that Bhagadatta was telling the truth? And suppose he was—for a moment—speaking the truth, well, so what? What harm was there in that? It could very well be that kokilas grew up in crows' nests But that didn't turn a kokila into a crow, did it? Come spring, and the kokila's mellifluous voice made the truth apparent—"I am a kokila I am a kokila "

open my eyes, he gave me a smile I looked around Brahmadatta, Virabahu and their companions, so frisky a while ago, had re-grouped I recalled the Royal Court, and it seemed that only a little while ago a flaming strength had entered my body And just as quickly the strength vanished—I had no idea where I felt drained But there was no pain in my body, I hurriedly sat up I examined my body for any wounds Not a scratch anywhere I stood up I took the nose-rope from father's hands, and smartly slapped the hump of the panting bull He shivered in fear He tucked his tail between his legs and shrank back The bull's keeper was standing nearby I passed the bull's rope to him He stared at me in wide-eyed surprise and walked away, leading his bull And so the Royal Court ended

11

That evening I got a full report of what happened Shon narrated how the bull had tried every method of overthrowing me, but failed completely For two hours he leapt around, tossing his horns, and jerking his body in weird contortions He jumped, he scratched at the ground with his hooves, but in the end he tired and stood still Foam flecked his mouth, he panted and snorted heavily In the meantime Shon rushed home and returned with father, who managed to slip the rope through the beast's nose But he had a difficult time getting me to release the bull's horns I was told that touching my body then was like touching fire

I became pensive I had grappled with a wild beast for two hours—and not a scratch showed on my body! Why? How did my body become so hot that merely touching it caused blisters?

I asked Shon curiously, "Shon, have you ever been hurt while playing?"

He replied, "Many times There was this time when I dived deep in the Ganga There was a jagged rock below My head struck it, and suddenly I saw stars When I emerged, I saw the water all red My head hurt Brahmadatta had pulled me out, and crushed some leaves with a rock and squeezed the medicinal sap on my head, I don't know what I haven't said a word of this to mother, because I know she'll be very upset Remember—not a word!" He bent his head and showed me the scar

When Shon gets hurt, he bleeds My body, when hurt, should bleed too I rose abruptly and went straight to Parnakuti, where a

from the army?" Brahmadatta the Vizier cautioned Shon

I hesitated, but they caught me by my arm and ensconced me on the black-stone throne Bending low with deep respect, Brahmadatta said, "Lord of Champanagari! Maharaja Vasusena—"

And the others joyfully concluded, "Victory to him!" and sat down There was no escape now for me, so I royally proclaimed, "Vizier, I hereby permit you to open the proceedings before the court assembly "

The proceedings began, but the loud shouts of victory had irritated a massive bull that was grazing in the nearby field along with other animals His bushy tail swung up stiff and erect Nostrils puffing, snorting fiercely, ears perked in the direction of the noise, horns pointed forward, he straightened his ears and charged towards us Brahmadatta saw his horrendous form approach and, sprinting helter-skelter for safety, with upraised arms, shouted, "General—Maharaja—Run! Run!—Disaster—in the kingdom "

Just as rain water spreads quickly in all directions, the boys scattered in no time Shon kept tugging at my arm and pulling I swiftly stood up straight, on the stone I pulled Shon up and made him stand behind me The bull sped towards us like a hurricane His eyes were flaming He was bent on crushing everything in his path Saliva dripped from his mouth, occasionally gleaming as the sunlight fell on it He halted briefly as he came near the stone His hooves scraped and scratched the earth and, his horns pointed straight ahead, he plunged forward like an arrow I glanced briefly at the sky With just his two hands the Sun-God was controlling, effortlessly, the innumerable horses of his chariot Before I had time to think, I pushed Shon aside, and the next instant I had firmly grasped the bull's horns Shon's scream "B-h a-i-y-a!" came to my ears indistinctly What happened after that, I don't remember clearly The more that beast tried to gore and toss me, the tighter I entwined my hands around his horns My body felt like the searing iron wheel of a rushing chariot Who was Vasu? Where was he?—I knew nothing

When my eyes opened, I found myself in the same field, but my head was cradled in my mother's lap Father was standing nearby, he was holding the bull by the nose rope The red-eyed, leaping bull now stood still, fatigued and panting His mouth was foaming Shon was standing beside my head, staring at me intently Seeing me

12

The next day father told me to get ready because we were going to Hastinapura. Obediently I began putting all the necessaries in one place. My mind seethed with thoughts. It was farewell to Champanagari now. All her sky-kissing trees—the flame-of-the-forest, the seven-leafed *sapta-parna*, the *andani*, the mahua, the trumpet-flower, the *khadira*—were going to be separated from me. The *patra-rathas*, eagles, kokilas, red sheldrakes, pigeons and other birds were all going to be distant from me. Brahmadatta, Viramitra, Bahuketu and other friends—I was going to be alienated from them. I was going far away from lovely Parnakuti which was situated under the thick shade of the banyan, and which had showered affection on me for fourteen years. And my mother Radha who loved me more than life itself, who reared me like a young calf, who tended me like a baby deer—I was leaving her too, and going who knows how far away. Whose breast-milk had not yet dried on my lips—that dear mother of mine—and I was going away, leaving her with nothing except tears. "Vasu-bhaiya! Vasu-bhaiya!"—who never tired repeating these words—that watchful, blameless, innocent Shon—I was going away from him too. And the thing that really pricked me was that I would never see the Sun-God as he climbed up on the vast waters of Ganga-mata and roused such profound inspiring feelings in me. I was off to Hastinapura! What was Hastinapura like? I had heard of its huge palaces. Massive gymnasia, gigantic arsenals packed with weapons, stables with rows of handsome neighing horses, and imposing temples whose domes caressed the sky like *sapta-parna* trees. And countless warriors too, with chests like huge doors of gateways, with strong arms and thighs. I had heard it was the capital of the Kuru dynasty. Where was it situated, I wondered.

Deep in thought, I wasted no time and kept placing near the chariot whatever I could lay hands on. Meanwhile, Shon turned up, and lent me a helping hand. He still had no idea that I was leaving too. He said, "Vasu-bhaiya, wouldn't it be wonderful if father brought his chariot here every time? We'd have a great time driving around in it!" I didn't reply. How was I going to explain to him that I was leaving him today? Father started yoking the horses to the chariot. Shon brought each horse to him. I stopped and sought mother's blessing at the gate. She raised me and smelt my head for a

cache of bows and arrows was arranged in a row. Swiftly I pulled out one arrow. Its sharp head shone like a ray of moonlight. I lifted the arrow above my head. Yes, its sharp point was aimed at my foot. I let go the shaft. It will pierce my foot, I thought, and, trembling, I closed my eyes. Dazzling rings of light swam in front of my eyes. The arrow struck my foot, but I felt no more than as if a grass blade had pricked me. The shaft's point had not penetrated my skin. I thought: My aim was wrong. I threw it at my foot again and again. Not once did the point pierce my flesh. I gazed intently at my foot. Not even the tiniest scratch! The demon of curiosity and doubt began dancing before me, leaving a trail of questions. Holding the arrow, madly I plunged it in my thigh, my arm, my chest, my stomach—wherever I could—with my full strength. But there was no place that it could penetrate. Why? Was my skin invulnerable? A lightning flash of doubt sped across one end of my mind to the other. Yes, my entire body was made of impenetrable flesh-armour. Impenetrable flesh-armour! Amazing!—Even if I were to jump off a speeding chariot, I would not get hurt. No stone, no rock, no weapon could ever wound me. No wound ever!—Meaning I would never die. Never die! My golden skin would shine for ever. I was immortal. My skin was invulnerable. That's why I wasn't even scratched when I grappled with the fierce bull. I had received the gift of special armour. My ears flash with special dazzling rings. Shon is my own brother. Yet Shon has neither special armour nor special ear-rings. Only me—why is it only me who's received all this? Who am I? Who am I? The sandpiper of doubt hammered its shrill cry in the sky of my mind. A fire of topsy-turvy thoughts blazed up. It struck me that I was different from others, very different. These thoughts pained me. The Radha-mata whose milk I sucked, whose flesh-and-blood was my inheritance, who accepted any burden and toiled incessantly for me—should I not be eternally grateful for the love she showered on me? "Vasu-bhaiya! Vasu-bhaiya!"—the loving brother who innocently day and night repeated my name—wasn't it all a deception then? My mind rebelled and harshly warned me: "*Who am I?* Don't scream this like a madman. Remember: you are the son of Adhiratha and Radha. You are Karna, the charioteer's son. You are Shon's elder brother Karna. You are a charioteer in a family of charioteers. A *charioteer*."

back!" I glanced at Pita-ji. He made a spot decision, "Good. Come with us." Overjoyed, Shon embraced me. I wiped the drops of sweat off his face with my upper garment. Truly, I was a lucky one to have so loving a brother!

The familiar outskirts of the town were left behind. Champanagari vanished in the thick surrounding foliage. My childhood also started fading. The greenery which bore the stamp of my boyhood bit by bit started to disappear. The *vakula*, *khadira*, and *dandavi* trees were all left behind. Champanagari's mushroom-shaped thatched hut and other houses faded in the distance. The plateau where two days ago we had played Raj-Sabha came into view. The black stone-slab in its centre stood alone, heated in the sun. The imaginary throne on which I was honourably ensconced as the reigning king— the throne of Maharaj Vasusena—silently bid me farewell. I raised my hands and respectfully prayed for blessings from the stone and from Champanagari. My life was racing away from the verdure of childhood—from Champanagari to Hastinapura.

13

Hastinapura! The prosperous and puissant capital of the Kurus! City of heroic warriors! City of varied artisans! City of my vivid imagination! City about which I had only heard from father—that city, after a month, slowly came into my sight. The domes of palaces and temples stood transfixed in the womb of the sky. And the Ganga flowed gently by, laving the city with her loveliness. Countless birds sang and sported on her banks in a sweet chaos. On left and right, for about six miles, there were only rows of tall mansions, cow-sheds, stables, temples and gymnasia. Our chariot was entering the capital of the illustrious, pure-souled Kaurava monarch Dhritarashtra. My life's chariot would be travelling from now on this road only. *Would Ganga-mata give me the same companionship here that I received from her in Champanagari?* I asked myself. Our chariot drove towards the outer limits in a swirl of dust. Grooms were leading horses to water-troughs; cowherds returning with cows with bells tinkling on their necks; women wending their way to the Ganga to fill their pitchers; ploughs atop shoulders, peasants trudging back after a hard day's work in the fields—my eyes etched each scene vividly on the canvas of my heart.

long time She pressed me to her heart and said distractedly, 'Remember this, Vasu Never enter any deep waters of the Ganga " Tears trickled down her cheeks Two dropped on my head I horripilated My blood coursed with the swiftness of wind Each drop of my blood was saying to the tears with the tenderest love, "Mother, how can I assure you that I will do as you say? I can only say even if death itself threatens your Vasu, he won't swerve a jot from the path of truth "

She remembered something, and returned to Parnakuti Quickly she placed a small silver casket in my hand In an anguished tone she said, "Vasu, whenever you think of me, remember to have a darshan of this casket See me in this casket Treasure it, saying, 'This is my mother' "

I packed the casket tightly in my upper garment Once again I sought her blessing With trembling hands, she placed a few drops of curd in my palm, which I reverentially swallowed I gazed full and long at the entire Parnakuti, filling my vision I turned The chariot was ready Shon was asking father something Father asked me to sit in the chariot

Hardly had I sat down than Shon asked father, "Where's Bhaiya going?" So far he had a look of dismay, now his eyes filled with tears

"I'm taking him to Hastinapura Why don't you go in?" Father slapped the reins hard on the horses' backs while saying this The horses raced ahead Shon raised his hand and shouting, "Bhaiya, wait! Wait!", he ran behind them Mother stepped forward and held him back I breathed a sigh of relief The chariot picked up speed Shon freed himself from mother's grasp I could see his small frame from a distance, running towards me Clutching his upper garment in one hand, the other uplifted, he continued running We had reached the town limits I had thought Shon would give up and go back But he kept on running with one hand upraised I asked father to halt Seeing us slow down, he ran even faster What amazing pluck that sweet and simple little boy Shon had! He wanted to accompany me—that's why he ran all the way, forgetting everything else What obduracy! No, not stubbornness—it was his spontaneous and pristine love for me Panting, he caught up with us Sweat drenched his young face Though fatigued, he jumped inside the chariot Sobbing, panting, he gasped jerkily, "You're leaving me and going! Isn't that it, Bhaiya? If you go I go with you I won't go

looked as radiant as Vishnu Himself The massive-headed mace in his hand made him look undisputably impressive He leapt out and approached father He had a distinctively haughty and imperious gait He walked the earth like a rutting elephant He was constantly adjusting his slipping upper garment with stylish jerks of his arms His lotus-eyes were piercing and lustrous, his nose dagger-straight and pointed I can't say why, but there was one thing about him I didn't like His thick and ugly eyebrows curved like a python able to crush the whole world in its sinuous folds

He glanced at me and asked father, "Chacha-ji, who's he?"

"*My son Karna, Yuvaraj," father replied*

"Karna Good But why did you bring him here today?"

"To show him your capital "

"Good Introduce him to the minister He'll take him round the city "

He entered like a hurricane, and returned like one, he ran up the stairs like lightning At the last but one step, he stopped, turned, and like a cloudburst dashed down the stairs and stood in front of us Gazing fixedly at my flesh-ear-rings he said, "These ear-rings of yours—you were born with them, no?"

"Yes," I answered, looking straight into his lotus-like eyes

"They make you very handsome So handsome that no one's going to believe you are Chacha-ji's son Don't you think so, Chacha-ji?" He placed his hand on my shoulder and laughed out loud as he said this Father was, I think, stunned He didn't say a word, just stood there, transfixed

The ink-black cloud must have shrouded the sun because the white, pure stone of the palace suddenly appeared smoky and grimy I felt suffocated Prince Duryodhana stormed away exactly as he had stormed in We kept staring at his fading figure

The shut-in earlier sky seemed now to open up into cloudlessness, because the hazy stairs became again pristine

Father parked his carriage in the chariot-house To save Shon the difficulty of climbing all these stairs, he took him to his rooms and returned We went up the palace steps to pay our respects to Maharaja Dhritarashtra Little bells of memory tinkled in the temple of my mind as I climbed the steps Father used to tell me stories of the heroic exploits of the Kuru dynasty, and these stories now sprang up from the deep recesses of my mind I was agog with fear, curiosity, respect, doubt, devotion, and a multitude of strange feelings

The sun, wearily taking leave of the city, departed westwards His scattered rays drenched the clouds on the horizon in a medley of pink, orange, and other enchanting hues I gazed respectfully at the Sun weaving such lovely magic with his rays I thought I noticed on the Sun's face the same expression of sadness that one sees in a woman who parts with something very precious to her Near him was a single dark cloud That perhaps was why I felt what I felt It was as if, passing his setting rays like long loving fingers on Hastinapura's face, he was saying, "We will meet again tomorrow"

Our chariot entered by the main gate of the royal palace The gate-keepers welcomed father with respectful bows We halted near the stables As always, Shon jumped out first I kept looking at the palace from the chariot It looked as pretty as a new-born baby It was constructed entirely of white marble All of Champanagari could easily be fitted inside its huge circumference The white palace with its black ramparts looked like a black clay pot filled to the brim with a mound of salt Inside were a series of double courtyards and halls In the centre a circular pool, in which the countless rays of the setting sun played colourfully Multi-coloured fish and milk white long-necked swans frolicked in its waters White and blue lotuses swayed in the breeze On four sides were four lion statues carved in white stone In front were numerous stairs leading up to the palace I counted the steps One hundred and five! Did I miss a step or two? I re counted One, two, four, ten, twenty, fifty, hundred, one hundred and one, two, four, five, and one hundred and six *Arre!* The last time I counted there were one hundred and five How do I get a hundred and six now? I worried over this "A hundred and five or a hundred and six How does that affect me?" I adjusted my upper garment and was about to step on the pure and splendid ground of Hastinapura when suddenly a chariot pulled by seven black horses thundered in like a storm through the main gates A gate-keeper announced loudly, "Prince Duryodhana, the Jewel in the Crown of Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Monarch of Hastinapura! The attendants, gate-keepers, and subjects sprang to attention Father turned and bowed in the direction of the chariot

Chacha-ji, when did you return from Champanagari?" Duryodhana smilingly asked as he descended from his chariot

"This very moment, Yuvaraj," father said humbly

From the chariot I looked at Prince Duryodhana He was about fourteen or fifteen years old He was dressed as a warrior, and

golden crown with multi-coloured embellishments. His royal vesture dazzled. He had large necklaces of ruby, pearl, and beryl, whose nimbus encircled his manly neck with soft-blue effulgence. The large-chested monarch looked most impressive on account of his thick, flowing white beard. But dark circles ringed his eyes, which seemed to be closed. On his right, just below him, on a simple white wooden seat sat a serene and refulgent man, one end of whose white upper garment, draped over his left shoulder, revealed his fair shining strong body as muscular as a plantain tree. His face was as round as a pot; his eyes gentle and serious; a large tilak graced his forehead. On the Maharaja's left stood a tall, formidable man holding a golden sceptre.

Father bowed low and respectfully greeted his monarch. He signalled me to do the same. I *pranamed.*

"Your majesty, your servant Adhiratha, chief of the Sutas, bows and salutes you. My son, Karna here, also salutes you in deepest homage," father said, bowing.

"Come. Tell me news, Adhiratha, of Champanagari. And is this son of yours the same who was born with flesh-armour and flesh-ear-rings? We have heard a great deal about the ear-rings and the impenetrable armour."

"Yes, Maharaja. This is he, Karna."

"Karna, child, come near." He stretched his hand in my direction.

Father nodded to me to approach the monarch. I quickly stepped forward. He groped forward and took my hand in his. I looked up at his face. The edges of his delicate, pink eyes were moist. The muscles around his eyes twitched restlessly in an effort to open them. Instead, what happened was that the water at the corners of his eyes trickled troublingly down his cheeks and into his beard. I touched his feet. He raised me up by my hand, cupped my face in his trembling hands, and fingered my ear-rings fully. There was a strange fascination in his quavering caresses. Raising his eyebrows and turning to his right, he said, "Vidura, it's really remarkable! He has flesh-ear-rings! Most extraordinary."

"Yes, Maharaja. And his body is protected by golden skin-armour." Then Vidura asked father, "Adhiratha, you are dark-complexioned. How did your son get to be golden-skinned?"

"Gurudev, he has his mother's complexion." Father stood with folded palms and said, "I have a prayer, Maharaja."

The illustrious Maharaja Hasti of the Solar Dynasty had founded this city after seeing the vast and pure Ganga flowing nearby His great-grandson Kuru turned out to be so extra-ordinary that the dynasty came to be known by his name The descendants were called Kauravas It was this same illustrious Maharaja Kuru who ordered this palace built

The Solar Dynasty boasted a learned monarch like Manu, a finest-of mortals like Puraravas, an Indra-vanquisher like Nahusha, an earth shaking world-conqueror like Yayati, Yayati's valiant sons Yadu and Puru, and others like Janamejaya, Ahamyati, Devatithi, Dushyanta Bharata Hasti and Ajamidha, naturally it was to be expected that Maharaja Kuru would be even more magnificent and virtue-laden since his reign, in the minds of his subjects, over-shadowed the grandeur of his ancestors What kind of man was Maharaja Kuru? Why Maharaja Kuru only? Were his descendants any less splendid? Viduratha, Anashvan, Parikshit, Bhimsena, Parishravas and others constituted a dynastic garland in which each flower excelled its companion Maharaja Parikshit was truly a peak of Kuru glory Parishravas' son Maharaja Shantanu married a fisher-chief's daughter and set an example to the Kuru dynasty His brother Maharaja Devapi renounced the huge prosperous kingdom, as if it was nothing more valuable than a blade of grass, he was indeed the shining star of the Kuru tradition

Who knows how many joy-drenched days of triumph and victory this royal temple had witnessed?

Inside, we walked on, leaving behind one palatial splendour after another I let my eyes take in as much of the grandeur as possible The royal temple glowed with the splendours of the surrounding palaces Each palace stone pillar was finely sculpted Each pillar was carved out of a huge monolith On the palace walls the lives of the Kuru ancestors were displayed in beautiful paintings Near the gates of each palace, servants and maids stood by humbly, efficiently performing their various duties Here and there were smooth, beautiful statues of soldiers in different poses of combat and duel Also, in wooden cages one could see peacocks, kokilas, pigeons, *bhardavajas* and other birds, emitting weird cries—living artistic testimonials to Kuru glory

We approached Dhritarashtra's palace I gazed with ardent eagerness Maharaja Dhritarashtra sat on a gold ornamented dais, carved with fine inlay workmanship On his head was a beautiful

golden crown with multi-coloured embellishments His royal vesture dazzled He had large necklaces of ruby, pearl, and beryl, whose nimbus encircled his manly neck with soft-blue effulgence The large-chested monarch looked most impressive on account of his thick, flowing white beard But dark circles ringed his eyes, which seemed to be closed On his right, just below him, on a simple white wooden seat sat a serene and refulgent man, one end of whose white upper garment, draped over his left shoulder, revealed his fair shining strong body as muscular as a plantain tree His face was as round as a pot, his eyes gentle and serious, a large tilak graced his forehead On the Maharaja's left stood a tall, formidable man holding a golden sceptre

Father bowed low and respectfully greeted his monarch He signalled me to do the same I *pranamed*

"Your majesty, your servant Adhiratha, chief of the Sutas, bows and salutes you My son, Karna here, also salutes you in deepest homage," father said, bowing

"Come Tell me news, Adhiratha, of Champanagari And is this son of yours the same who was born with flesh-armour and flesh-ear-rings? We have heard a great deal about the ear-rings and the impenetrable armour "

"Yes, Maharaja This is he, Karna "

"Karna, child, come near " He stretched his hand in my direction

Father nodded to me to approach the monarch I quickly stepped forward He groped forward and took my hand in his I looked up at his face The edges of his delicate, pink eyes were moist The muscles around his eyes twitched restlessly in an effort to open them Instead, what happened was that the water at the corners of his eyes trickled troublingly down his cheeks and into his beard I touched his feet He raised me up by my hand, cupped my face in his trembling hands, and fingered my ear-rings fully There was a strange fascination in his quavering caresses Raising his eyebrows and turning to his right, he said, "Vidura, it's really remarkable! He has flesh-ear rings! Most extraordinary "

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"You're right, son Gurudeva Vidura is Maharaja Dhritarashtra s brother, but he has resolved to become a royal sannyasi '

What's sannyasi?

"A sannayasi is one who renounces everything the kingdom, the palace, all this splendour—he has no claim on any of these "

"Why does he live here then?'

"To prevent his blind brother's kingdom from falling apart Each word he says here is respected So is the Pandavas' mother, Queen Kunti-devi "

"Raj-mata Kunti-devi " I was on the point of questioning again, when suddenly from a nearby grove a kokila trilled its "Ku-oo-ku-oo" and swished over our heads from an *ashoka* tree Looking at it, I recalled Bhagadatta, who had once observed that the kokila, which sings a full range of seven notes, is reared by a mother crow because its own mother lays her egg in a crow's nest Crazy Bhagadatta! Who cares where a kokila is reared? It's enough that at the right time its all-enchanting melody fills the countryside

We came to an impressive temple to Bhagavan Vishnu Its spire's cupola was made of gold, it dazzled in the background of the blue sky in the sinking light of the setting sun, and the rays seemed to turn into gold

"The dome was ordered by the Maharaja," father said, pointing towards it

I thought The king who ordered the golden cupola is blind He *cannot see the splendours of his own kingdom It must have been a* blind fate indeed that cruelly placed a king amidst such glories and took away his eyesight A hundred sons and a limitless magnificent kingdom—should such a raja be called blessed?—or woebegone, because he lacked the eyes to see all this? How did this blind father recognise his hundred sons? Most important, how did a sightless monarch manage to rule such a vast and flourishing kindgom? *Chhee!* There are some questions that have no answers

"Remember, son, you must touch Gurudeva's feet the moment you see him," father advised as we walked

"Pita-ji, what does Gurudeva look like? ' I asked eagerly

"How do *I* know? You'll see him "

We hurried our pace The roads swarmed with people Tall mansions flanked the thoroughfares Temple cupolas silhouetted the sky Tinkling echoes of temple bells filled the air. Grooms led

"What would you like, Adhiratha?"

"If my sons here could receive military training along with the princes—"

"Granted Go right now to Guru Drona-ji and register their names in his military school Do it today "

The Maharaja turned to the tall person on his left and said, "Vrishavarman, look after his needs "

"Your wish is a command, Maharaja " The minister saluted his monarch without, however, the slightest movement of the sceptre

We offered our homage also and came out of the palace I glanced in Vidura's direction before leaving I thought I saw a thin crease wrinkling his broad forehead It sometimes happens that though it is raining some place far away, lightning flashes in a cloudless sky—that thin crease was like such lightning, or so it seemed to me

14

From the city we proceeded to the military training centre I asked father, "What is wrong with Maharaja's eyes?"

"He's blind, my son That's why his wife, the Queen Mother Gandhari, out of sympathy has bandaged her eyes, so that she may not see this world "

'Raj-mata Gandhari devi?"

"Yes Prince Duryodhana's mother She has ninetynine other sons You'll see them in the training centre You'll also meet the Pandavas, sons of Maharaja Pandu "

"The Pandavas?"

"Yes The Kuru prince Pandu was the rightful heir to the kingdom, but the crown came to Dhritarashtra because of Pandu's untimely death Pandu had five sons They are called Pandavas by the citizens "

"Meaning that there are one hundred and five princes in the Kaurava dynasty Five Pandavas and the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra " I thought *How do all these princes behave with each other?*

"Also, two Maharajas and one grandfather—Pitamaha Bhishma" father explained

"Two Maharajas?"

"Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Vidura "

' How did Vidura become a Maharaja? Only a little while ago you called him Gurudeva "

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the point of the arrow. Near him, in loose robes, stood a tall old white-bearded man with his hair upknotted. His posture was as still as the deepest part of a river. He aligned the dark youth's string-pulling hand. He was explaining something. The youth listened attentively.

Father pointed and said, "Son, this is Pandu's son, the bow-expert Prince Arjuna. Instructing him is the revered guru Drona himself."

The expert archer Arjūna ! Whoever he was—but couldn't he have struck a more impressive warrior-pose ? The thought came suddenly to my mind.

Gurudeva Drona really looked as striking as an *ashoka* tree. His tall figure and his white dress together looked most impressive.

We used the arena path to go to the rostrum. I felt my blood pulsing with increased warmth as I gazed at the nearby training grounds. I wanted to enter them and swiftly practise the mace and the sword with all the contestants. I wanted to give these fresh, frisky horses a real work-out, till their mouths foamed. I wanted to swing the elephants by their trunks and, after exhausting them, mount their backs. As for the youth on the rostrum, I wanted to lift him up by his arm and show him how a first-rate-warrior pose was struck. And arrogant Bhima, cavorting in the wrestling area—I wanted to wrestle the pride out of him !

We reached the tall rostrum of the archery field. Prince Arjuna, from his high perch, fired an arrow which sliced clean into the distant wooden target. Guru Drona slapped Arjuna's shoulder and roared, "Splendid, Arjuna ! But go and check how deep your sharp-feathered shaft's embedded in the target." Arjuna rose obediently and resolutely walked up to the target. Father stepped forward in the meantime and, from beneath the rostrum, he offered his reverence to Drona. I glanced in the direction of Guru Drona. He was facing west. The rays of the setting sun gleamed with soft beauty on his white beard. His beard's long thick white hair flowed to his stomach. A few locks fluttered in the breeze. Lines of ash smeared his forhead, his arms, and his bare stomach. On his striking forehead, age had carved a network of wrinkles. His nose was straight and pointed. His eyebrows were pure-white; his eyes glowed with an other-wordly yet serene self-confidence. I bowed before him with deep reverence. It was father's wish that I be trained in war-skills under the tutelage of Guru Drona.

horses, and women with pitchers wended their way to the Ganga. The bazars were packed with citizens

After a long time we reached a massive main gate of iron On both sides extended black stone boundary walls narrowing into the far distance On the imposing arch of the iron gate fluttered a triangular saffron pennant The gatekeepers welcomed us in. We bent low and entered the military training centre of the Kurus

On all four sides were large rooms, and in the centre a huge arena, of four miles' circumference, divided in various sections The wrestlers' section was a circular area strewn with fine red dust, where a pair of youthful wrestlers were engaged in duel one after the other In the dead centre a muscular fair-skinned youth danced and clapped challenge None dared to go near him With uplifted arms he strutted all over the place

"Karna, that's Prince Bhima He's daring one and all to fight him," father pointed and explained

Another area was reserved for equestrian skills Lanes were marked out for horses to be ridden abreast Periodic ditches had been dug to serve to be ridden abreast. Other ditches had been dug to serve as obstacles Some were filled with water Walls had been erected at intervals One could see many young horse-riders exercising their horses by clearing these obstacles On the eastern side was a playground for the practice of sword-fights One side was studded with poles, hung with various types of armour and small and large shields Many warriors were engaged in sword-combat, furiously lunging at each other The clang of sword on sword echoed in the arena On the west was a similar circular playground, where mock mace-fights were in progress The contestants roared as they circled each other Javelins, spears, fire-spitting *shataghnis* and other weapons each had their own practice areas in that huge arena All the stone-constructed rooms were packed with a multitude of varied weapons In the arena a tall, huge-dimensioned rostrum for training in the art of aiming at moving objects so fashioned that, no matter from which part one looked, it always appeared to be in the dead centre of the arena On top of the rostrum were flower-decorated bows of various sizes and shapes On one side were countless arrow-filled quivers In front were the targets On the rostrum sat a dark-skinned warrior in fighting posture, placing his body's weight on his right foot He had pulled the bow-string taut, up to his ear One eye closed, he focused his other eye in line with

again, "Yuvaraj, before killing a petty snake, kill the snake that's within you. Anger is a terrible snake. Never harm the weak."

We looked at the rostrum—it was Gurudeva Drona.

A youth hurriedly approached Arjuna—a tall young man with a serene expression. He placed his hand on Arjuna's shoulder and said sweetly, "What made you take aim without thinking?"

Arjuna stood silent. I looked at father questioningly about that tall youth; he whispered in my ear, "Yuvaraj Yudhishthira."

Instantly all the students of that magnificent stadium encircled Arjuna, and chorused, "What's it? What's it?" I stepped out of the melee, and intently surveyed the stadium. Tomorrow I would be starting my training here. But one question kept buzzing in my head: What was preventing my getting trained alongside the princes? Only a little while ago, Gurudeva had explained that war-skills were exclusive to Kshatriyas. What did "Kshatriya" mean? Was I a Kshatriya or not? If not, how do I become one?

Registering my name and Shon's in the school, we came out by the massive main gate. Father was exceptionally quiet. I broke the silence by asking, "Pita-ji, why can't I get training along with the princes?"

"Because, my child, you are not a Kshatriya," he replied.

"What's 'Kshatriya'?"

"Anyone born in a royal family is a Kshatriya. You were born to a charioteer, my child," he explained and gently patted my back.

"Lineage! Are the royally born blessed with hundreds of arms? *Why do they get this special importance?*"

"You won't understand. From tomorrow see that you turn up regularly at school here. Take pains to learn well whatever they teach you."

I wasn't satisfied by his reply. Like a madman's mind, mine started comparing Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gurudeva Drona. What was the similarity between Hastinapura's Maharaja Dhritarashtra on the one hand—he who lovingly cupped my face in his hands and tried to "see" my flesh-ear-rings with his unseeing eyes—and the respected Guru Drona on the other—he who would not so much as even glance at my lovely ear-rings? In point of fact, Gurudeva was *so* different from the Maharaja. He was saying, "Don't strike the weak." Was he shrewd or was he just undignified—this Gurudeva of the Kauravas who called a snake a weakling? Had he no inkling that this black snake could in a trice

"This is my son Karna," father introduced me

I was sure he was going to ask about my flesh-ear-rings He could not care less, he only said, "Your son, Adhiratha? How is it you have brought him to the military training centre?"

"To leave him in your care "

"Why in *my* care?"

"If he can pick up a little war-skill along with the other princes "

"With the princes? Adhiratha, war-skills are a Kshatriya's prerogative You can get your son admitted here, but you cannot expect him to learn with the Kshatriya princes "

Father's face fell What should he say? He was nonplussed In the end, he fumbled, "As Gurudeva wishes "

Paying our respects once again to Gurudeva, we prepared to leave We met Prince Arjuna on the way, he was returning after plucking the arrow out of the target I studied him carefully His complexion was sky-blue, his chin sharp as a spear-point, his lustrous eyes curved in the direction of his temples, his nose straight and pointed, his forehead broad as a platter, he had beautiful eyebrows, indeed, his entire face enchanting In a sweet bell-like voice he asked father, "Have you come today from Champanagari, uncle?"

"Yes I've brought my son Karna too "

Arjuna glanced at me More than my eyes, he seemed to be fascinated by my flesh ear-rings He was on the point of asking me something when a serpent-like creature slithered and fell from above between us Stupefied, we stepped back two paces All looked up in fear and utter curiosity A large dust-coloured vulture was flapping its huge wings and circling in the sky,twisting its strong neck periodically and casting its keen sight on the earth below where a black snake lay motionless, the vulture's intention being presumably to recover it The impact of the fall had temporarily stunned the snake Then, it wriggled and bared its fangs like an open hand Hissing a couple of times, it waved its portentous hood but swiftly slithered away, in fear of his life, wherever he got the chance With lightning speed Prince Arjuna fitted the arrow to his bow, and took aim even as he sprinted ahead In the meanwhile came a shout from the rostrum, "Arjuna, don't aim!" A strangely powerful voice Prince Arjuna instantly did as ordered, as if singed by fire With arrow-swiftness, the snake slid and disappeared in the stone boundary of the stadium The voice roared from the rostrum

cupped and "saw" my face with the feeling fingers of his hands. Vidura, like a lotus in the pool in front of the palace. Bhima, whirling on one leg, lost in his own thoughts in the wrestling ring. Novice Arjuna, striking an archer's stance with his bow. Ocean-deep Drona, the guru whose mind could not be plumbed. And Yudhishthira, who even as a child spoke with the wisdom of adults.

As if mechanically, I tried weighing Prince Duryodhana and Arjuna, Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gurudeva Drona, Vidura and Yudhishthira. Not comparing—assessing. Each was unique, with a distinct personality. God alone knows how many different kinds of people there are in this world, with how many different natures. Who conceived them in that way? And for what purpose? When you come to think of it, who is the brilliant Creator creating such a mutitude of different specimens? For no two seem to be alike, or, if they seem to be, they turn out to be different. *Chhee!* There are no final answers to these hotly debated questions.

The *ingudi* oil in the stone lamp was slowly diminishing, its glow fading. Shon had fallen fast asleep. The day-long journey and walking about in the city had tired out father to the point of sleep. I rose quietly, and softly blew out the dimming flame. Acrid smoke from the snuffed lamp entered my nostrils. I stretched out on my bed. My first day in Hastinapura! Memories, like guests, are self-important, carefree creatures: they knock at the mind's door whenever they like. I suddenly remembered my mother Radha. It distressed me to think that she was all alone now in our home Parnakuti in Champanagari—oppressively alone, all day long, day after day. Forgetting that I was no more at home, she must be calling out again and again, "Vasu! Vasu!" A mother's love was indeed the fullness of all the loves in the three worlds. When I left she gave a silver casket as a memento. Why of all things did she decide to give her dear son this special gift? She had said, "Every time you think of me, remember to look at this casket. Let this casket take the place of your mother." How simple she was! How could a lifeless casket be a substitute for a mother—how could the very idea occur to her? Mother, can thirst for milk be satisfied by buttermilk? But, come what may, I will always cherish your wishes. No matter what, I'll keep your memory fresh till the last moment of my life. I gently opened the cloth wrapped casket. Respectfully I lifted it to my forehead and placed it on one side of the bed. There were three people in the world whom I loved deeply. My mother,

poison Arjuna black-and-blue? Wasn't it an ominous sign that a snake had slithered between Prince Arjuna and me? *Chhee*! How weird the human mind is! That was just a mere coincidence But the sight of Garuda brought back to me the repeated question of Shon: "Bhaiya, are you going to be like Garuda, soaring ever and ever higher?" Silly Shon! I have seen with my own eyes Garuda rooting for his food in the ground like any common crow If he didn't need food he'd be up there, fixed in the sky, all the time

We returned to the palace Shon was waiting for us, exactly as before in the room Near him was the minister, Vrishavarman A dusty dusk was settling on the royal grounds, which looked as impressive as the sky—but forlorn I, father, Shon and the minister entered one of the palace's south-facing rooms Father's room A small window opened on the east I poked my head out I could see, far away, the blurred stone boundary wall of the arena The Ganga's waters circled serenely around it All Hastinapura seemed to be sliding into a slow stupor, like a child tired out after a day of play An attendant entered with a torch and lit the large stone lamp, filled with *ingudi* oil, placed in a corner The shadowed faces of the minister, father, and Shon focused clearly

"Suta chief," asked the minister confidently, "what happened? Your son got admitted, didn't he?"

"Yes," father replied briefly He seemed lost in deep thought

"Good If you need anything at all, just inform the attendant outside I'll take leave of you now " The minister left

An attendant brought us dinner from the kitchen After eating, we began chatting Shon naturally was the one who had all the questions But my mind was somewhere else I sat on my bed and gazed at the small glowing flame of the stone lamp Anything that glowed, always attracted me mysteriously One by one events of the past came and stood in front of my eyes I wanted to weave a colourful garland with them Running behind the chariot, Shon—with hand uplifted—crying Father, determined and unswerving, but melting seeing Shon's condition Prince Duryodhana, bursting on us like a storm, as soon as we passed the portals of Hastinapura's palace His strutting gait He was the first Kuru warrior I had laid eye on How affectionately he spoke about my flesh-ear-rings! He had placed his hand on my shoulder—and looked at me with such familial intimacy! Yes, to be a prince was to be like Duryodhana, determined and impressive! And his father Dhritarashtra, who

birth Seeing it, fresh hopes stirred in me Hundreds of thousands of miles away was that radiance—but I felt there was no distance, no difference between that radiance and me I felt mysteriously lightened in body My hands joined by themselves in prayer My eyes closed spontaneously In my mind I concentrated instinctively on that radiance For endless miles on miles I saw nothing but dazzling light—an intensely intense radiance Incandescent, but soothing and very desirable Without any reason I felt that there was a kinship between me and that effulgence, that there were unknown threads that linked me to that single ocean vast brilliance that scattered the darkness of the universe I lost myself and was transported, elevated higher and still higher on those threads

Today that radiance was all the more enchanting I joined my palms in peace and closed my eyes I became a single wave on an endless ocean of light—a wave that had no separate existence, a wave that probably didn't want to exist separately anyway One wave out of the countless others in that infinite ocean

I thought someone touched my shoulder At first I was not very sure it was a touch—but I *was* being shaken by the shoulder Opening my eyes slowly, I turned An old man with an excep tionally serene countenance was looking at me His beard, the hair on his head and on his eyebrows were all white as the whitest clouds Long lines of ash streaked his noble forehead His hand did not leave my shoulder—a heavy and powerful hand Who could this old man be? I strung a list of questions to my mind s bow No, I had not seen him anywhere before

He asked me with extreme affection, "Who are you, child?'

"Karna, the charioteer's son '

"Charioteer's son Which charioteer?"

"Champanagari's Adhiratha-ji's son "

"Adhiratha?"

"Yes, sir And " I asked expectantly, curiously

'I am Bhishma " His beard's locks rippled in the breeze

Bhishma! Grandsire Bhishma! Venerable Bhishma of the Kauravas and Pandavas! Bhishma, son of Ganga! The dome of the temple of the Kuru dynasty! Bhishma, the flag of the kingdom of warriors! For a moment my mind went numb The veritable hero-god of the Kauravas—in front of me, on the bank of the Ganga!

I stood there, like a blade of grass beside a massive banyan I had no idea what I should do Quickly I recollected myself and dipped in

my father, and Shon In the same way, there were three things that attracted me deeply One Ganga-mata, who spoke to me in countless tongues with her countless waves, for hours on end Two Surya, who always inspired me with his glorious radiance Three this little gift of mother, this silver casket The casket reminded me of Champanagari My mind calf sucked the teats of mother-earth, memory streams of milk spurted forth, wrapped and lapped in sweetness, I slept, I did not know when

15

I woke at dawn to bird song, opened the window, and gazed out Darkness was slowly lifting from the horizon The Ganga flowed through a silk-filmy mist All Hastinapura was slowly stretching awake Picking up a dried upper garment, I stepped out of the room There was no chance of anyone being there at this time, so I could bathe to my heart's content in the Ganga With this in mind, I walked towards the ghat All around me, the earth seemed still unwilling to dissipate the soft clinging mist How enchanting they looked—the mansions and roads draped in delicate obscurity A single bell tinkled in the temple on the ghat of the Ganga In that silent stillness only that single tinkle sounded with startling clarity I moved in its direction I remembered mother's warning "Don't ever step into the Ganga's waters " I smiled inwardly Mother was the apprehensive type! Who did she think I was—a suckling babe? I was full sixteen years old Me—afraid of that water? Lost in thought, I reached the ghat I placed my upper garment on the steps Tightening my lower garment, I gazed ahead Everything was clearly visible for about twelve cubits, beyond that, nothing but white mist I respectfully *namaskared* the spectacle, then dived into the water The water was warmish For about an hour I splashed about freely After an hour or so, the haze scattered I swam back to the ghat, changed, dipped and squeezed my garment dry, and placed it on the steps I stared ahead In the distance, the Sun-God was slowly climbing up the sky His soft rays caressed the waters awake I offered *arghya* to the Sun God in sacred *anjali* How profound and romantic he looked! Every day he appeared in a new form to me—or so it seemed Every day a wonderful manifestation, every day a wonderful radiance Today's compelling glory was never tomorrow's again Tomorrow's glory was a miraculous new

birth Seeing it, fresh hopes stirred in me Hundreds of thousands of miles away was that radiance—but I felt there was no distance, no difference between that radiance and me I felt mysteriously lightened in body My hands joined by themselves in prayer My eyes closed spontaneously In my mind I concentrated instinctively on that radiance For endless miles on miles I saw nothing but dazzling light—an intensely intense radiance Incandescent, but soothing and very desirable Without any reason I felt that there was a kinship between me and that effulgence, that there were unknown threads that linked me to that single ocean-vast brilliance that scattered the darkness of the universe I lost myself and was transported, elevated higher and still higher on those threads

Today that radiance was all the more enchanting I joined my palms in peace and closed my eyes I became a single wave on an endless ocean of light—a wave that had no separate existence, a wave that probably didn't want to exist separately anyway One wave out of the countless others in that infinite ocean

I thought someone touched my shoulder At first I was not very sure it was a touch—but I *was* being shaken by the shoulder Opening my eyes slowly, I turned An old man with an exceptionally serene countenance was looking at me His beard, the hair on his head and on his eyebrows were all white as the whitest clouds Long lines of ash streaked his noble forehead His hand did not leave my shoulder—a heavy and powerful hand Who could this old man be? I strung a list of questions to my mind's bow No, I had not seen him anywhere before

He asked me with extreme affection, "Who are you, child?"

"Karna, the charioteer's son "

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The war arena! I was ready in to time. Shon, all dressed, had in fact been waiting for me for a long time. The casket mother had presented me had been carefully placed in an alcove, and I respectfully offered before it four coral blossoms of the *parijata* tree, the tree of paradise. Obeisance over, I whispered, "Bless me, mother. Your son Vasu has come to a major turning in his life. Today I start my military training."

Father shouted from outside, "Karna! Shon! Hurry up!" I peered out of the window. The Sun-God lit up the lands on the eastern horizon in sparkling laughter. His reflection in the waters of the Ganga seemed to give him two distinct identities from a distance: the sun-god of the sky and the sun-god of the earth. I took Shon's hand in mine and came out of the room.

Father, I and Shon entered the arena. There were many more youths there than yesterday, sitting around the central platform, reciting in a chorus, gravely and serenely chanting the early morning prayers.

"*Om! Isavasyam idam sarvam...*" "Om. All this is swaddled in God's glory..." The prayers continued for a long time. I asked father to go back.

"Remember: be disciplined," he said, and left. I gazed at the vast peaceful stadium. Soon the atmosphere was going to change like a crackle of storm-clouds from the east. All the different weapons were going to blend and resound in a splendid cacophony, made sharper by the shrill and fierce war-cries of the trainees.

The prayers ended. Gurudeva Drona, who was sitting in the centre, stood up solemnly, raised both his hands to our *pranama.* I was hoping that he would raise his hand to bless us also, but Arjuna happened to intervene just then and, placing his hand on Arjuna's shoulder, he left, chatting with his pupil. He did not have time even to glance in our direction. This was my first day in the war training arena. Somebody had told me that no education was ever successful without a guru's blessing. That was why I *pranamed* the great guru of the Kauravas—and who was this Prince Arjuna coming out of thin air to frustrate my hopes? Couldn't he have chosen some other time to appear? Was Gurudeva his personal possession? If one were to go by Gurudeva's words yesterday, was it true that only Kshatriyas could receive a guru's blessings? If so, then how could a charioteer's son like me ever aspire to be blessed? And assuming that I did get the blessing, that wouldn't change me into a Kshatriya, would it? Come to think of it, why should I want to become a

homage before him He raised me instantly, and said sweetly, "You were immersed in your puja I intruded I hope you are not upset "

"No," I replied

"Really, child, I could not stop myself from breaking into your meditation "

I gazed at him in surprise After a pause he said, "For thirty years I have come here daily at this time on this bank of the Ganga, but not a single soul of Hastinapura has ever arrived here ahead of me At least I never saw any You are the first "

"Me?" What should I say next?

"Yes That is why I interrupted you—after a great deal of waiting " He looked at my flesh ear-rings and said, "How handsome you look with these ear-rings "

"I was born with them,' I replied

"Look after them well " He slowly stepped down the ghat's stairs His imposing hill-high figure gradually faded He stood neck-deep in the water His locks swam in the river His lock-shaded head looked lovely as a lotus on the waters From where I stood I made obeisance to him Draping half my upper garment around me, I returned to the palace My first day in Hastinapura had been blessed with a darshan of Grandsire Bhishma

That strange meeting intrigued me I had wanted so much to see Pitamaha Bhishma all day—and he had come personally and graced me! And that too, on the bank of the Ganga and at such an auspicious time of morning! How sweetly he spoke to me! How calm and pure his countenance—like the inner sanctum of a temple! That he should even deign to like anything about a simple charioteer's son like me! The elder maharaja of the Kauravas—that he should affectionately place his hand on my shoulder and enquire about my welfare! How truly great is a noble person who has humility! Blessed must be the family in which such a superlative, self-effacing person like Grandsire Bhishma takes birth! And how lucky I was to be a guest in such a splendid palace! I would now get repeated darshans of this great personality! His serene, compassionate eyes would gaze again on me! To the three whom I loved so deeply, a fourth was now added Pitamaha Bhishma

16

The instant I reached the palace, father advised me to get ready

Sun-God! From today I am your disciple. Bless me. Show me the path." Touching the bow to my forehead, I bent low and *pranamaed* the solar divinity. Shon had come up unknown and was standing behind me. I said to him also, "Shon, *namaskara* Surya Deva. Ask for his blessing." He joined his palms respectfully. After a while, I lowered the bow to the ground.

We descended the platform steps. My mind was at peace. I could see Gurudeva Drona and Prince Arjuna approaching the front of the platform. Arjuna looked in my direction and smiled. I did not feel like smiling. It seemed to me that his smile was ironical.

I remembered Grandsire Bhishma. *This* Arjuna's grandfather! There was hardly anything similar between the two. What a world of difference between their natures and their behaviour! As he passed by, Arjuna asked for the sake of asking, "Who's this?"

"My younger brother," I said proudly.

"Is he joining school too?" Venerable Drona asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Go, join Kripa in that group there."

I said nothing. I did not feel like giving him even a *namaskara*. As I walked by, I turned and glanced at Arjuna. He was staring fixedly, in surprise, at my flesh-ear-rings.

We approached Kripa's group. Kripa was the brother of Drona's wife. Many youths were practising bowcraft under his watchful eye. For a moment it struck me—how silly of this horde of young princes to show off everywhere! Did even one of them have Duryodhana's impressive personality? Did a single one of them have the magnificent gait of Duryodhana? Which mother's son was there among them with the piercing gaze of Duryodhana? I saw Prince Duryodhana coming while these thoughts ran through my mind. If I went to him, he would certainly enquire about my welfare—so I approached him. But he wasn't Prince Duryodhana. He looked very much like Duryodhana. One couldn't tell who was who, just as one can't tell one cygnet from another. Who could it be, I wondered. His dress indicated a prince. But which prince? Kaurava or Pandava? Because he looked almost Duryodhana's double, he had to be a Kaurava. But which Kaurava? Kripa called out, "Duhshasana!" He hurried towards Kripa. So this was Duhshasana. Ah, what a close resemblance between him and Duryodhana. You could substitute one for the other! Prince Duryodhana and Prince Duhshasana. The same majestic gait, the same intense gaze.... Could it be that Duhshasana was Duryodhana's own shadow?

would it? Come to think of it, why should I want to become a Kshatriya at all? Why should I become a Kshatriya merely to obtain this guru's favour? Blessed or not blessed, it didn't matter—I *will* remain a charioteer's son I will remain the charioteer-son of father Adhiratha and mother Radha This guru's blessing was reserved exclusively for Kshatriyas, his knowledge was for Kshatriyas, he was a guru for Kshatriyas only How could he ever be *my* guru? Who then should I make my guru on this first day? Whose blessing would encourage me to proceed on my quest for knowledge? Was there anyone in this world ready to become the guru of a charioteer's son? None Why did Arjuna have to turn up now? Why was Gurudeva Drona so fond of him? They're guru and pupil, aren't they? I was soured I lowered my head and began to think Was it my fault I was not born in a royal family? Was there ever anyone who got the birth he desired? Who decides high and low birth? What makes a man great? His merit, surely? But who was going to listen to me? Was my first day going to be an exercise in futility? I was restless to start practising straight shooting with my bow and arrows *Chhee* ! I suppose some days are sent only to test a person What should I do? What?

In frustration I started circling the stone platform like a madman Once I thought of running straight up to Gurudeva Drona and telling him, "He alone is a guru who knows his pupil's mind What kind of thing is this that you have a pupil here thrashing like a fish out of water for your blessing—and you know nothing about it? Why do you give so much importance to Arjuna? What's so special about him? Look at me—I have shining flesh ear-rings My skin, deep yellow like the *kadali* tree, is unpiercable "

The next instant I remembered father's caution "Be disciplined " But how? Gurudeva Drona did not so much as glance at me So what should I do—go home in tears? What should I do?

As always, I gazed up at the eastern sky The Sun-God, like a red hot iron ball, was setting the blue dome of the sky on fire My disappointment vanished in a trice Indeed, what more powerful guru could there be in the three worlds than this splendid solar intensity? What need was there for me to beg blessings from anyone else? From today my only guru would be the Sun From today, puja only before him, from today, only his command mattered Instantly I climbed the stone platform, where lay a flower-decorated bow I lifted it as high as I could, and said, "World-darkness-dispelling

what one cannot change And no point misunderstanding things and harbouring ill will towards others If Arjuna was such a favourite of his guru, that was something for his brothers to feel envious about perhaps—how did I come into the picture? How was I related to Arjuna? No relation at all I was a charioteer's son He was a prince His way was different from mine Both of us travelled on two very different roads of life Very well, Prince Arjuna! Become the best! Be the invincible archer! If need arose, Karna the charioteer's son will be glad to hold your chariot's reins I had made up my mind I was not going to be jealous of Arjuna or of anyone else My way was very different from those of all the other princes here Our births decided that I would learn bowcraft because I wanted to I also wanted to shoot arrows by sound, and to release countless arrows simultaneously in ten directions As for having a guru—what did it matter? What mattered was a pupil's desire to learn I would be firm in body and mind I would learn for learning's sake The vow I took was irreversible

18

My routine for military training was drawn up In a month's time I became familiar with spears, crowbars, arrows, daggers, fire-guns, swords, *pattishas*, *bhushundis*, maces, whirling discs and many other weapons Because I was more interested in bowcraft, I practised archery and bow-related weapons in greater detail Arrows by themselves comprised innumerable types The *karni*-shaft had two sharp heads, which dragged out the intestines when it gored the stomach The *nalika*-shaft's large width was studded with angled teeth which shredded the veins when it was pulled out of the body The deadly *lipta*-shaft's front part was smeared with poisonous grease The *bastika*-shaft's head remained embedded in the body, only the shaft could be pulled out The *suchi* shaft's conical needle-head was perfect for even the smallest and thinnest of targets, such as the pupil of the eye The *jihma*-shaft slithered like a snake but penetrated clean into its victim Apart from these there were bull-boned, elephant-boned, black, foul smelling, sheldrake-feathered, gold-feathered, iron-tipped, horse-boned, rock-hard, numbing, serpent-faced and various other arrows I was ready to dedicate all my energies to learn how to shoot these arrows at a target Each second of my pupilship was to be spent in this pursuit

17

For the first fifteen days I did nothing except get acquainted with the war-weapons of the arena The fact was that I was in no mood to learn anything Guru Drona's embarrassing behaviour towards me the very first day had completely disenchanted me There were times I wondered which was better—should I continue to rot in this princes' rubbish heap as a charioteer's son or should I return to Champanagari? What use was military skill to me? What great war was in the offing anyway? And if there was one, so what?—I had no place in it, except as a charioteer What use was war-training to a charioteer? A charioteer had to know about horses, and how to use the various aids to tame their irrepressible natures Couldn't I pick all that up in Champanagari itself? But the very next moment I thought *No, this won't do* Military skill is not for the battlefield only The strong-armed man is always considered superior This military training would impart strength in me I would show Prince Arjuna he wasn t the one and only expert archer in the world But, come to think of it, that poor man hadn't harmed me in any way Why this rivalry with him? Envy blinds a man It's not his fault if Guru Drona loves him Like me, he's just another young man Which pupil doesn't want to be loved by his guru? And surely there's no guru who can love a pupil so much without first assessing his faults and virtues? If that is so, then I, Gurudeva, will prove to be pure gold on your touchstone If you can love Arjuna so much merely because he's a good archer, then I will become an even better archer But what use will it be—my becoming such an expert archer? You'll never take me to your heart You'll never caress my back lovingly—because I am a charioteer's son, and Arjuna after all is a Kshatriya's son What's so special about being a Kshatriya? Why this discrimination on a caste basis? What was the need for it? But I couldn't say this out openly The caste whose ancestors by their valour destroyed their enemies and spread the fame of the Kuru caste and the Kuru kingdom—surely there must be something special about that caste My caste's ancestors, generation after generation, scrubbed horses and held reins How could you compare them with Kshatriyas? Really, wouldn't it have been wonderful if I had been born in a royal Kshatriya family! But how could that ever happen? Banyan crows should not aspire to become palace pigeons No use, let it be One shouldn't get so worked up about

what one cannot change. And no point misunderstanding things and harbouring ill will towards others. If Arjuna was such a favourite of his guru, that was something for his brothers to feel envious about perhaps—how did I come into the picture? How was I related to Arjuna? No relation at all. I was a charioteer's son. He was a prince. His way was different from mine. Both of us travelled on two very different roads of life. Very well, Prince Arjuna! Become the best! Be the invincible archer! If need arose, Karna the charioteer's son will be glad to hold your chariot's reins. I had made up my mind: I was not going to be jealous of Arjuna or of anyone else. My way was very different from those of all the other princes here. Our births decided that. I would learn bowcraft because I wanted to. I also wanted to shoot arrows by sound, and to release countless arrows simultaneously in ten directions. As for having a guru—what did it matter? What mattered was a pupil's desire to learn. I would be firm in body and mind. I would learn for learning's sake. The vow I took was irreversible.

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Previously I had three loves in my life Ganga-mata, the god Surya, and the affection-loaded silver casket gifted by Radha-mata But one more love was added when I entered the military academy archery

19

Father had been an excellent charioteer to the Maharaja for many years But old age now prevented him for being as alert as he was earlier To assist him, the Maharaja had engaged, as his personal help, the skilful son of the charioteer Guvalgana The monarch would sometimes summon him, and I discovered his name was Sanjaya He was older, so I addressed him as Uncle Sanjaya On his countenance and on Vidura's there was an expression of great calm I was much taken by his name Sanjaya Even more than that I liked his being a charioteer I would look out for any odd chance to meet and talk to him

In the chariot yards father and he would talk about the most fascinating topics the best breed of horses, the most effective axle grease, the toughest wood for wheels, the optimum number of spokes for maximum efficiency, how the spokes affect the vehicle's speed, and so on He was always telling me, "Karna, you are a charioteer's son Remember that the best horses never sit on the ground, not even when they sleep at night And the best charioteer never leaves his chariot-seat, not even at the risk of his life Once seated, he's always seated "

"The things you say, Kaka! A horse—and he never sits on the ground!" I exclaimed in surprise

"Yes Not just that—but if a horse that's standing and sleeping raises a hoof and tries to sleep on three legs—you can rest assured he's useless for long journeys Remember a horse is the finest of beasts "

'Finest?" I casually asked, because I wanted him to carry on expatiating His voice, sweet as a *bharadvaja* bird's, was so mellifluous that I could listen to him forever

"Finest—and the most intelligent Karna, if you ever ride into a thick forest and lose your way, just let go of the horse's reins, and this intelligent beast will find the way back for you from where you started " I would get all kinds of horse lore like this in the course of Kaka's talks

How happily time passed listening to his accounts of the variety of equestrian behaviour, diseases, and gaits He gave me detailed information on the dharma-based duties and responsibilities of the charioteer's profession, and the rules of the arena He instructed me on which herbs were medicinal for the special afflictions that affected horses' hooves, by actually treating disease stricken horses

Sanjaya-Kaka was the chief of the palace charioteers Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Grandsire Bhishma, the chief courtier Vidura, the Queen Mother and the minister Vrishavarman—all respected him Uncle Sanjaya, admired by such eminences, actually spent hours chatting with me, and advising me on the niceties of charioteering Sometimes he would take me and Shon on drives in the capital in his splendidly flower-and-bell decorated chariot

20

One day Shon and I went for a stroll in the city On our way back, near the palace, we noticed a royal chariot approaching, with shiny flickering drapes on all four sides Impressed by the whiteness of the five powerful pure-white horses pulling the chariot, I gazed, entranced One of them occasionally threw his head back The chariot raced smoothly ahead

Suddenly Shon let go of my hand and ran towards the chariot Why was he rushing like a madman?—I had no idea In no time at all he reached the chariot It made me angry to see him behave so foolishly He'll be under the wheels before I can reach him! What to do? My hair stood on end with fear If he didn't move out of the chariot's way in a flash, it would be all over—he would be crushed under the wheels I gathered all my energies and yelled, "Shon! Stop!" Swiftly he bent low and picked up a black object The charioteer saw him and dexterously stopped the horses With great difficulty the chariot clattered to a halt near Shon Flecks of foam from the mouth of one of the horses dripped on Shon's head But his mind was elsewhere He was softly caressing the black object in his hand Panting, I came near him He showed me the object, saying distressedly, "Bhaiya! See! It was about to get run over " It was a kitten small eyes blinking, it began whimpering I didn't know what to say to Shon I couldn't fume at him I gazed at him in astonishment Was this the same Shon who came running behind our chariot when we were leaving?

I offered *arghya* to the flaming orb, saying, "Your disciple, Karna the son of a charioteer, seeks your blessing Favour me, Gurudeva " Then, unblinkingly gazing at the Sun, I could see countless radiant molecules glittering in its rays—molecules revolving at incredible speeds, radiant molecules that dispelled the darkness of the world, eternally speeding molecules that inspired thousands of streams of energy and enterprise What would happen if these molecules failed to appear even for a single day? This Hastinapura, these palaces and temples, these strutting warriors—Arjuna too, and Bhima and Drona—what would happen to them? Ah, they were such committed workers, these dazzling bursts of energy I thought· *If I, Karna could become just one of those marvellous energy-particles, how splendid! Then I could blaze myself into a flaming sacrifice and remove the darkness of the universe!* But that was not possible

I lost myself in these thoughts I was aware of nothing not my body-armour, not my flesh-ear-rings With wide-open eyes I drank in the energy of the Sun But no amount of drinking satisfied me

Hours passed like this The Radiance passed over my head and was now at my back It was not possible to see it any more My neck was tired I closed my eyes in peace And then the vibrations of the Radiance again swam in front of my vision I felt each drop of my blood vibrating like the Radiance After a long time I opened my eyes My back was aglow with intense heat The sands were heated too I stepped quickly out of the water, changed, and strode towards the palace

23

Immediately on reaching the palace, I would slip into my trainee's uniform and, taking Shon with me, walk up to the arena Our day passed practising the uses of different war weapons Sometimes, circling and whirling the mace, sometimes, brandishing the sword, sometimes, hurling the spear No resting until I had picked up expertly all there was to learn about whatever weapon came to my hand I spent hours of *tapasya* just to grasp the science of bowcraft Learning is like a plant fed with the fertiliser of dedication and watered with single-minded effort, it thrives With

out them, more likely than not it wastes away I would pass the whole day with only one end in mind' unremitting effort and dedication My desire was to start with what was the most difficult to learn—and learn it I did In the evening, after Guru Drona dismissed us, all of us laid down our weapons and wended our way back to our homes I instructed Shon to stay back while I hurried to the bank of the Ganga The Ganga flowed behind the military academy in its course towards the city I stood there and gazed westwards, worshipping the Sun-God as he took leave of Hastinapura Stroking his golden fingers on my body, he seemed to whisper, "We will meet again, tomorrow " And all the accumulated tiredness of war-craft, practised during the day, vanished in an instant

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He ran his hand lovingly on the kitten's back, as ecstatic as if he had gained heaven His upper garment had fallen on the ground he didn't even notice it The mother cat turned up, mewing shrilly, searching for the kitten Still mewing, she lolled near our feet I asked Shon to place the kitten on the ground

No sooner had he done this than she picked up the kitten by its nape in her mouth, and disappeared Who knows where she had been loitering, after losing her kitten? If Shon hadn't shown such courage, was there any doubt at all that her little one would be lying squashed and dead in the dust of the royal road? Who would have listened to her piteous mewing then?

The incident reminded me of Radha-mata Her loving presence stood in front of my eyes How dotingly she had looked after me! A mother should always be like Radha-mata I was lost in memories of Champanagari The charioteer spoke up from his chariot-seat, 'Hurry up! Get out of the way! Quick! The Queen Mother Kunti-devi is in the chariot!'

The Queen Mother Kunti devi!

I grabbed Shon's arm and jerked him away The chariot clattered off in a swirl of dust I gazed longingly again at its beautiful pure white horses I was puzzled Though meant for six, the chariot had only five horses yoked to it Why had one been left out?

I thought *Is there a shortage of horses in the palace?* The chariot disappeared Shon's upper garment had been trampled under its wheels He picked it up, dusted it, and draped it around his shoulders We proceeded to our guest room I placed my arm around Shon's shoulder—something I had never done before

21

My days in Hastinapura passed happily In the beginning I used to miss Champanagari all the time Slowly, however, without any reason, though, I stopped missing my home But the casket in my possession always brought mother's love-filled face back to me Because she was so far away, I realised how deeply precious she was Before dropping off each night, I would say to myself *Mother, lives tied to each other by bonds of love remain close no matter how far apart they are You are indeed in this casket No, you are in two caskets one, this, which you gave me, and the other, my heart*

Memories are like cyclonic storms They spring out of nowhere

and go when and where they please Not just that they sometimes wreak havoc in the peaceful waters of the mind There were times when Champanagari came to me as a piercing memory, then I would feel low, nothing could please me At such times I would take Shon out, and we would go for a stroll in the city My depression would fade We had become familiar with the city as a result of these frequent outings Which roads led where, which deity presided in which temple, where the lakes were, the stables, the granaries, the armouries Hastinapura appeared to us like a garden blooming with varied flowers of all shapes and colours How many different people lived in this city! Singers, dancers, warriors, traders, farmers, artists, pandits and, apart from these, leather craftsmen, potters, sweepers and other workers Go any time, and the city was chockful of crowds I never tired of this teeming city In fact, many a time I thought of playing truant and, instead of going to the military academy, go on a city sightseeing spree But this was not possible I had come here to study, not to indulge

22

My routine in Hastinapura was fixed Every day I woke up at crack of dawn, the auspicious "time of Brahma", and proceeded as required to the Ganga To forestall any objections, I never went to the river ghat I had selected a different spot for myself—a clean and serene corner—where there was no chance of anyone's interfering There I would dip to my heart's content, and then stand waist-deep in the water Shoals of small fish would fleet by and try to nip my ankles—but I knew they would fail Frustrated by my impenetrable skin, they would tire and swim away Finally they stopped coming at me altogether What must they have surmised?—that my legs were two familiar blocks of stone?

I cupped water in my hollowed palm and waited to offer *anjali* to the Sun As he lifted his head in slow scarlet splendour on the distant waters of the Ganga, it looked as if the countless red waves of the river were dancing with a golden veil over their heads A stray flamingo circled between us sporadically, blocking the intensity of the Sun's radiance wherever it moved I thought *Even this small creature has some power: it tries to hide the Sun with its presence* As the bird flew away, the Sun glowed again with full resplendence

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I offered *arghya* to the flaming orb, saying, "Your disciple, Karna the son of a charioteer, seeks your blessing Favour me, Gurudeva " Then, unblinkingly gazing at the Sun, I could see countless radiant molecules glittering in its rays—molecules revolving at incredible speeds, radiant molecules that dispelled the darkness of the world, eternally speeding molecules that inspired thousands of streams of energy and enterprise What would happen if these molecules failed to appear even for a single day? This Hastinapura, these palaces and temples, these strutting warriors—Arjuna too, and Bhima and Drona—what would happen to them? Ah, they were such committed workers, these dazzling bursts of energy I thought· *If I, Karna could become just one of those marvellous energy-particles, how splendid! Then I could blaze myself into a flaming sacrifice and remove the darkness of the universe!* But that was not possible

I lost myself in these thoughts I was aware of nothing not my body-armour, not my flesh-ear-rings With wide-open eyes I drank in the energy of the Sun But no amount of drinking satisfied me.

Hours passed like this The Radiance passed over my head and was now at my back It was not possible to see it any more My neck was tired I closed my eyes in peace And then the vibrations of the Radiance again swam in front of my vision I felt each drop of my blood vibrating like the Radiance After a long time I opened my eyes My back was aglow with intense heat The sands were heated too I stepped quickly out of the water, changed, and strode towards the palace

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used to go to the palace, and that only because of Prince Duryodhana's persuasive invitations He and his minister Vrishavarman had helped us considerably Duryodhana had ninety-nine brothers, but he was the only one who ever enquired about my welfare Nor was I specially attracted to any of them What weird names they had! Durmarsha, Durmukha, and so on There was one person I had taken a liking to—Ashvatthaman, Guru Drona's son. How free and easy he was in his ways! So young, yet he spoke with such authority on dharma, the atman, prowess, duty, love, and other subjects I used to spend all my leisure discussing with him. He knew me only as Karna Who I was, where I came from, why I was here—he never probed into these matters And that was why I liked him most of all

One day I asked him casually, "Don't you find your name Ashvatthaman a little strange?"

He burst into child-like laughter and replied, "Yes It is odd, I think so too Do you know what people say when I ask them about my name?"

"Well 'Ashva' means horse, doesn't it? So you're as impressive as a horse, something like that, surely?"

"No They say I neighed like a horse at the time of my birth, so I'm the Horse-Voiced One, Ashvatthaman I don't like the explanation, though How can a baby neigh? How's it possible? To tell you the truth, I like my name, because my father calls me 'Ashu' Only when I'm alone with him, though In front of others, he calls me Ashvatthaman "

I liked the name "Ashu" I liked it a lot

My days passed happily in his company Once he touched my flesh-ear-rings and said, "Karna, your ear-rings grow more and more golden day by day "

He added, "Who's the goldsmith in this city who does such fine gold-leaf work ?"

'How do I know which goldsmith plates my ear-rings for me? If I did, I'd have asked him to make a golden pair for my friend Ashvatthaman as well He's such a good person "

He laughed "No, bhai, your ear-rings are yours If a thief sees a rishi's son like me in a thatched hut with golden ear-rings, he'll steal them ears and all! And then—I'll have neither rings, nor ears!" We burst into uproarious laughter, forgetting everything around us I used to think Guru Drona's son is so guileless, so detached There was no difference between him and Shon But his father is so grave

and serene that one can hardly fathom his mind. Is it that heavy responsibility makes an adult of a person? Or is it that some are just born adult? Like Yudhishthira, for example—always serious. Catch him laughing even by mistake! All the military trainees respected him, though. And as for his brother Arjuna—he's the life and soul of all. Look anywhere, and it's Arjuna. Guru Drona doesn't love even Ashvatthaman as much as he loves Arjuna. But what's behind his great affection for Arjuna? In point of fact, there's no one the equal of Ashvatthaman in the military academy. Yet Arjuna gets all the respect, to the exclusion of all others. Is it right to give so much importance to one individual? Won't he lose his head if he gets such attention? What special test makes Arjuna so favoured of Drona? I had often wanted to question Ashvatthaman about this, but I restrained myself with great effort. He might think I was showing disrespect to his father. And so that question was one I could never be able to put to him. But Ashvatthaman was a friend—and as a friend he was closer to me than all the other trainees.

25

I took time off once to visit mother in Champanagari. On my return eight days later I learnt from Ashvatthaman that Guru Drona had tested all his pupils in my absence. He perched a stuffed bird on a high branch of an *ashoka* tree. Whoever pierced the left eye of the bird would receive his fulsome approbation. He summoned all the pupils, one by one called them to the stone platform, handed each contender a bow, and ordered him to take aim. The pupil strode up, lifted the bow, and strung it, after which Guru Drona asked, "Before you shoot, tell me: what do you see?"

Different contenders gave different replies. Foolish Bhima replied, "I see the green hills in the distance." Someone said he saw clouds, another saw the green leaves of the tree, a third the bird.

Guru Drona wasn't satisfied. He ordered each of these pupils to lay down the bow and go back. Last to come up was Arjuna. The guru asked, "Arjuna, what do you see?"

Arjuna replied, "The bird's eye."

Guru Drona was delighted. He thumped Arjuna's back and said, "Splendid! Shoot and pierce the eye then!" Arjuna fired the arrow and split the eye clean. Another thump on Arjuna's back.

This incident was narrated to me by Ashvatthaman who rolled his large eyes even larger as he recounted the details Suddenly he asked me, "Karna, if you had been present what would you have replied to father?"

I reflected for a while I projected myself in imagination in the shooting posture on the stone platform and fixed my gaze on the eye of the bird, and said, "Ashvatthaman, had I been there, I'd have said,'I see nothing' When there's a target in front of Karna, Karna no longer is Karna His body becomes all arrow, not just arrow, the arrow's tip, and the centre of the target itself I'd have said, 'My arrowy body sees only a tiny dot in front of me' "

Delighted with my answer, Ashvatthaman embraced me He said, "Karna, you'll be the greatest archer yet!" I released myself from his arms, and made up my mind that I would pierce the same target today for which Guru Drona had so extravagantly praised Arjuna If I did so, I would sooner or later get closer to Guru Drona He'd thump my back too

That evening I went to the city, bought a stuffed bird, and returned As soon as silence descended on all sides at night, I woke Shon We emerged from our room I was holding the stuffed bird Total stillness in the war arena Throbbing with the clangour of weapons all day—and dead silent now At different places the *ingudi* filled lamps were glowing, as if imparting confidence to the sombre games stadium I picked up a clay lamp and climbed up the archers' platform In front of me was the *ashoka* tree I pointed to it, and handing the stuffed bird to Shon I said, ' Tie this bird high on that tree and wait there with this clay lamp in your hand "

"Why?" he asked, surprised

"I'll explain later Hurry!"

He took the bird and lamp and went near the tree He scurried up in an instant like a squirrel After some time he said, "Bhaiya, there's a string here tied on a branch Shall I tie it here?"

"Climb as far high up as you can," I shouted from below

He climbed further up till he couldn't go higher He tied the bird to a branch, and himself perched on another branch I shouted, "Hold the lamp so it throws light on the bird Don't shake!' He held the lamp steady I lifted the bow and aimed I had dedicated myself as a pupil of the Sun God on that very platform My mind said to me *Remember, Prince Arjuna pierced one eye of the target—the visible one You'll pierce both—the visible and the one you can't see*

How? The bird will spin the instant the first arrow strikes. The moment it twists round, and the other side is in focus, you'll shoot straight into the second eye. Both arrows are to be fired simultaneously, and in the dim glow of this lamp.

I gazed in the direction of the tree. I guessed the speed and direction of the wind by the flicker of the lamp. From the quiver near me I quickly pulled out two sharp shafts, steadied the bow, fixed both arrows, pulled the string taut.... I was... no longer I. My body, mind, sight, breath—the two tips of the two arrows and the two eyes of the bird—became one. My fingers became absolutely still on the taut string. There were two different sensations on both bow-fingers. The first arrow had to be released a fraction of a second before its twin. A moment's steadiness—then both shafts whizzed towards the target. The first struck—the bird spun—the second hit, and the clumsily-tied bird fell on the ground with a thud. I flung aside the bow, leapt four steps at a time down the platform, and sprinted towards the tree. I took the bird to a corner where a lamp glowed and examined it. Both eyes' pupils were embedded with two arrows. My eyes shone with the joy of success. Shon clambered down the tree. In the distance I heard the night watchman tapping his steel shaft on the ground at the stroke of midnight. We returned to our room and slept.

From that day, when no one was present in the vicinity, we would slip out at night and secretly practise the most complex feats of target-shooting. It was easy to concentrate the energies of the mind on silent, lonely nights. There was none to interrupt or interfere.

Neither Shon nor I realised how many years passed in this routine of practice. Wrestling bouts had toughened my body: Punching my arm muscles, Ashvatthaman would ask me, "Is this flesh or iron?"

26

One day I accompanied Ashvatthaman to the palace. Duryodhana's maternal uncle Shakuni was sitting near the lake opposite the palace, fondling a pure-white swan. I was fascinated by the bird. How majestically he sways his neck as he paddles! As if he is the sole monarch of the watery kingdom! We approached uncle Shakuni. He looked very much like Dhritarashtra. But he had the habit of raising his eyebrows all the time that he talked, with the result that his listener was compelled to look at his thick brows

above his beady eyes Stroking the swan, he asked Ashvatthaman, "Tell me, Ashvatthaman, how are the princes progressing in their military training?"

"Arjuna's expert in bowcraft, Duryodhana in mace-wielding, Bhima in wrestling, Nakula in sword-play, Duhshasana in fist-fight, Sahadeva in chakra-flinging, and Yudhishthira in war-strategy," Ashvatthaman replied

"Time then to test them once soon "

"Yes, sir, that's what father was thinking," Ashvatthaman said

By this time an attendant had turned up with milk in a stone bowl. He placed the bowl near the lake Uncle Shakuni transferred the swan to Ashvatthaman, stopped, scooped water in his cupped hands and trickled it in the bowl

"Mama ji, are you economising on milk?" Ashvatthaman asked

"No This is a royal swan You can pour as much water as you like in this bowl but he won't drink the water,' Shakuni raised his eybrows and said as he wiped his hands on his shawl

'How's that?"

"See for yourself " Shakuni gently took the swan from Ashvatthaman and placed him near the bowl The bird stretched his sinuous neck inside the bowl, and gurglingly sucked the milk Some time passed, he pulled up his neck, and jerked it once, four drops of milk splattered out We peered curiously inside the bowl The scooped-up water was visible inside—just plain, clear water Uncle Shakuni poured it back into the lake, and raised his eyebrows

I was astonished by what I saw Imagination's horses started pulling my mind-chariot Isn't man also like that swan? What he needs, he takes, the rest he leaves Hadn't I done the same thing? With the exceptions of Prince Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman, which other person had I come close to in that huge city? Why couldn't I feel intimate with others? What answer was there to this? How could the swan ever explain the way it separated milk from water? But it was surely no fault of mine Prince Duryodhana affectionately enquired about me, and that was the reason I was drawn towards him Human love is like the earth First, a single seed is sown Then innumerable ears of corn shoot up The same with man one word of love, and he freely responds with a whole flowing Ganga of love That was why I loved Duryodhana Ashvatthaman was simple and guileless I saw no difference between him and Shon And I really knew no one else It wasn't possible to know others either, because I didn't have the time.

Bhima, trapped in the arrogance of his strength, lolled about in the earth of the wrestling pit. Outside the pit, he did nothing but eat. What an uncultured voice he had! He had fruity globular eyes, and he snored like a thunderstorm. As for Prince Yudhishthira, all he could do was carry on discussing for hours with Ashvatthaman about war, politics, duty, and other similar profound subjects. And Nakula and Sahadeva—I didn't even know how they were and what they did. Prince Duryodhana and Duhshasana excepting, all the others appeared to me to be useless parasitical types, like the ubiquitous *amar-bela* weed. What was the point in knowing them? Man should be like the royal swan. What you like, take; leave the rest. This was my view.

Ashvatthaman and I returned from the palace. On the way Ashvatthaman remembered something, and said abruptly, "Karna, I said nothing about you to Shakuni-*mama*."

"He asked you how the princes were progressing, not about all the pupils of the academy."

"But I could have said a lot about you to him."

"Such as? You mean, about these flesh-ear-rings and about my armour, don't you? The whole city knows about that by now."

"No, not that. I could have told him that Arjuna excelled in bowcraft, Duryodhana in the mace, Bhima in wrestling, Nakula in the sword, Duhshasana in boxing, Sahadeva in the chakra, Yudhishthira in military strategy—and Karna in all of these!"

Was he chanting my praises or telling the truth—it was hard to say, love does blind a person, and I was his friend. His very close friend. So it could very well be that he wasn't seeing the truth. So I preferred not to say anything.

27

Six years flew away like a flock of birds, where no one knows. Nothing more was left to learn in war-craft. In fact, the nocturnal practice that Shon and I had done had given us such insights into the use of each and every weapon and into every aspect of war-craft as became known only to the two of us. Besides doing ordinary wrestling, I actually grappled with four wrestlers at a time in the arena. I do not know why, but I never seemed to tire during all these exercises. Indeed, the more I exerted, the more my body seemed to grow hot—so hot sometimes that my wrestling rivals would say,

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"See for yourself " Shakuni gently took the swan from Ashvatthaman and placed him near the bowl The bird stretched his sinuous neck inside the bowl, and gurglingly sucked the milk Some time passed, he pulled up his neck, and jerked it once, four drops of milk splattered out We peered curiously inside the bowl The scooped up water was visible inside—just plain, clear water Uncle Shakuni poured it back into the lake, and raised his eyebrows

I was astonished by what I saw Imagination's horses started pulling my mind-chariot Isn't man also like that swan? What he needs, he takes, the rest he leaves Hadn't I done the same thing? With the exceptions of Prince Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman, which other person had I come close to in that huge city? Why couldn't I feel intimate with others? What answer was there to this? How could the swan ever explain the way it separated milk from water? But it was surely no fault of mine Prince Duryodhana affectionately enquired about me, and that was the reason I was drawn towards him Human love is like the earth First, a single seed is sown Then innumerable ears of corn shoot up The same with man one word of love, and he freely responds with a whole flowing Ganga of love That was why I loved Duryodhana Ashvatthaman was simple and guileless I saw no difference between him and Shon And I really knew no one else It wasn't possible to know others either, because I didn't have the time

Bhima, trapped in the arrogance of his strength, lolled about in the earth of the wrestling pit. Outside the pit, he did nothing but eat. What an uncultured voice he had! He had fruity globular eyes, and he snored like a thunderstorm. As for Prince Yudhishthira, all he could do was carry on discussing for hours with Ashvatthaman about war, politics, duty, and other similar profound subjects. And Nakula and Sahadeva—I didn't even know how they were and what they did. Prince Duryodhana and Duhshasana excepting, all the others appeared to me to be useless parasitical types, like the ubiquitous *amar-bela* weed. What was the point in knowing them? Man should be like the royal swan. What you like, take; leave the rest. This was my view.

Ashvatthaman and I returned from the palace. On the way Ashvatthaman remembered something, and said abruptly, "Karna, I said nothing about you to Shakuni-*mama*."

"He asked you how the princes were progressing, not about all the pupils of the academy."

"But I could have said a lot about you to him."

"Such as? You mean, about these flesh-ear-rings and about my armour, don't you? The whole city knows about that by now."

"No, not that. I could have told him that Arjuna excelled in bowcraft, Duryodhana in the mace, Bhima in wrestling, Nakula in the sword, Duhshasana in boxing, Sahadeva in the chakra, Yudhishthira in military strategy—and Karna in all of these!"

Was he chanting my praises or telling the truth—it was hard to say, love does blind a person, and I was his friend. His very close friend. So it could very well be that he wasn't seeing the truth. So I preferred not to say anything.

27

Six years flew away like a flock of birds, where no one knows. Nothing more was left to learn in war-craft. In fact, the nocturnal practice that Shon and I had done had given us such insights into the use of each and every weapon and into every aspect of war-craft as became known only to the two of us. Besides doing ordinary wrestling, I actually grappled with four wrestlers at a time in the arena. I do not know why, but I never seemed to tire during all these exercises. Indeed, the more I exerted, the more my body seemed to grow hot—so hot sometimes that my wrestling rivals would say,

"Karna, go straight to the Ganga and take a few dips and cool your body—then come and call us to wrestle with you What's this you have—a body or the fierce hot wheels of a chariot?"

They were so terrified of my thorn-grip that the instant I readied myself with it they all pretended to collapse The speciality of this feint is that you immobilise the opponent's neck in a pincer grip The entire energy of the body is concentrated in one's vice-like fist which, by gradually increasing the pressure, suffocates and kills the adversary Simultaneously, the adversary's hands and feet are entwined round one's body in such a manner that, in spite of having the strength to unloose the grip on his neck, he is unable to do anything about it This was my special defensive manoeuvre According to the rules of wrestling, this cruel device was permitted only in the course of a duel And "duel" meant very simply that only one would survive There could be only one outcome victory or death If a contender out of fear of death begged mercy, he was spared But his life after that was no better than that of a widow's In a kingdom of warriors, he wasn't worth a straw I had studiously picked up all feints that might prove useful in duels But my abiding faith was in one feint only—the thorn-grip

28

Many days and nights, many dry and green leaves floated away on the wind of time Every day the same routine rise at crack of dawn, take a holy dip in the Ganga, pray to the Sun-God from early morning till afternoon till my back was sunned thoroughly warm, then in the academy imbibing the theory of spear, sword, pipe-gun, *bhushundi*, scimitar, *pattisha* and other weapons, in the evening going with Shon for target-practice in the dim light of stone-lamps, and last of all fade away to sleep, recalling the events of the day along with nostalgic thoughts of Champanagari Six years passed in this manner No more did little Vasu play in the courtyard of my mind Hastinapura had usurped Champanagari Discipline and valour had replaced curiosity and uncertainty The tiny feet pattering in the sands of the Ganga near Champanagari now fell with heavy thuds on the soil of Hastinapura The python called Time had swallowed six whole years! Six years! If I were to say what happened in these six years—and what did *not* happen—that would make another full story During these six years I was just a student

of a military academy But nobody treated me like a student I was under the general guidance of Acharya Drona in the class of Acharya Kripa In that class were also the other ordinary students of Hastinapura, I being the most ordinary of all In that crush of students, neither Drona nor Kripa had time to talk to me To tell the truth, it never struck me either that I would like to be patted on the back or otherwise enquired about Whenever I faced any special difficulty regarding the use of a weapon, I simply closed my eyes briefly, meditated on my guru—the Sun-God—and in a twinkling all became clear, and I withdrew from the others, as if a *yakshini* had waved a magic wand over me There's an extraordinary power in the devotion known as shraddha Without shraddha for some person or other, no human can live In my studenthood, I reposed shraddha in my guru I hadn't the least idea of what fear was But I did have this occasionally angry feeling—why did neither of my two gurus ever talk to me? Was Karna only a stone puppet to them? I felt like a thirsty creature in the middle of an ocean, unable to drink And if I decided to speak out my feelings, who else but Shon did I have near me to speak to? I felt suffocated If elders pointed out the faults of juniors, that was fine But what if they ignored them? Then the mind choked and like a pushing sprout tried to find some other way out What did I get in these six years? A terrible, unendurable indifference A scalding sense of being abandoned No one even knew there was a boy named Karna in the military academy I wasn't the flatterer type That is how Shon and I created a beautiful spontaneous world of our own in the academy itself Instead of developing respect for Acharya Drona and Acharya Kripa, we felt uneasy with them I started feeling they were gurus only in name How could you have a guru who didn't know his disciple's mind? How could you have a guru who didn't nourish the bud of his disciple's mind with the breath of affection? I thirsted for guru-love Which is why I permitted the hand of *my* guru, the Sun-God, to caress my back until such time as the back grew warm—yes, and till then I continued to offer *arghya*-homage to the Sun-God The continual caressing had heated my back into a smooth hardness

The student princes of the academy were treated very differently The darling of Drona and Kripa was Arjuna That was the reason Duryodhana tried to draw attention to himself—why should Arjuna be the sole beneficiary? It always ended up in squabbling Bhima

resented his brother being teased, and he couldn't control his sharp temper. Biting his lips in anger, he would let fly at anyone within sight. Fear of Drona prevented anyone from informing the Acharya about the quarrels.

Once it so happened that all of them went for an outing in the woods outside the city. While Bhima was sleeping, Duryodhana with the connivance of Duhshasana trussed his hands and feet with creeper-ropes and dumped him in a lake. But Bhima escaped unscathed. It was rumoured that the water gods freed him.

I refused to believe any of this. For one thing, if Bhima had really been flung in the lake in the manner described, there was no chance of his surviving, because who ever heard of water gods? We all knew only huge-jawed fish and vicious crocodiles populated lakes. And the second thing was that as soon as Bhima emerged from the lake, he would immediately get to know of the plot to assassinate him. Who else but Duryodhana could have conspired to do so? And so, the instant he came out, he would have finished off Duryodhana with his mace. For Bhima was not one to check his anger. No amount of persuasion could move him; no amount of consolation pacify him.

Where would anyone get the time to pay attention to the two sons of a charioteer after attending to the quarrels of the princes and noisily eulogising their exploits? Six years passed like this. A sixteen-year old teen-ager became a youth of twentytwo. I wanted to take on every challenging and competitive task.

Youth! The ceaseless throbbing of arteries all aflame! The most priceless gift of Nature to Man! The only royal road of life! The spring of Nature's empire, the outstretched plumes of the peacock-mind, the variegated hood of the blossoming body, the exquisite fragrance of the garden of imagination, the most resplendent steed in the ceaselessly speeding chariot of the world-creator, the head-high confident period of a man's life, the time of achieving, of doing things—*anything*, the time of shakti and swiftness....

Everything connected with childhood is coloured green. Everything associated with youth is rose-pink and orange. The reach of young sight goes beyond the sky-touching horizon. It is sweetly and fluently attracted to whatever is moving and shining. Youth's rhythm naturally makes the impossible possible.

I had started finding some of my childhood and boyhood memories laughable. The Karna who addressed the Ganga as

"Ganga-mata" the Karna who collected in his shawl shells from the shore the Karna who dreamt of soaring in the sky like Garuda the Karna who fulfilled the wishes of his companions by agreeing to act as king and sitting on the stone throne the Karna who admired the shine of his flesh-ear-rings reflected in the waters of the Ganga!—how self-deceiving all this delight! Such blind shraddha! Such doubts, such ignorance!

Everything became blurred, shattered by Time's assault Youth's charioteer now gripped the reins of life's chariot A five-horsed chariot effort, desire for glory, fearlessness, pride, compassionate involvement

Youth means dynamism Can light ever be dark? Only youthful dynamism inspires and adds to people's dignified aspirations

Desire for glory is the sole stable attribute of youth I'll be famous! I'll take what is—and bend it underfoot! This thought alone is what makes a young man rise in life

Fearlessness is the highest note in the rhythmic scale of youth Fear is when this note is broken and out of tune Can sounds from a *cracked bamboo flute ever please anyone? The world longs for the* high note, not the cracked

Pride is the very soul of youth A man without principles is no man, and a youth without pride is no youth A young man always prides himself on his principles, and will become a martyr for them if the need arises

Compassionate involvement is youth's ornament A constant readiness to use strength to protect the weak A priceless dedication *to live oneself—and to let others live also*

Such is youth Where you have this, you'll see youth chafing under insult, you'll see a person roused to anger in order to redress injustice, you'll see a person uprooting all forms of exploitation you'll see the true face of victory Where this is, is light If light is absent, darkness is present The darkness that embraces insult, the darkness that confuses the poison of defeat with the nectar of victory, the darkness that glorifies injustice, the darkness that fears attack

29

The affection I had for Ashvatthaman had by now turned into an intense abiding love In the whole of Hastinapura I had found a friend at last, dear as life itself

Once we were sitting on the bank of the Ganga, chatting. Very casually he asked, "Karna, the reason I like you is not just that you are so good-natured, but that you are so good-looking."

"Am I really all that handsome?"

"Yes. It's something I'm sure you don't even dream of, but every day when you return from your bath in the Ganga when the Sun is at its peak, that's the time when the ladies of the city leave all their social norms on the shelf and find one reàson or another to open their windows to have a glimpse of you."

"Do you know what you are saying, Ashvatthaman? If what you say is true, I'll have to find another path to the Ganga from tomorrow."

"It's true, Karna. Strong, bull-like shoulders, cheeks like pink *gurhal* flowers, the bluish shadows of your flesh-ear-rings falling on your cheeks, nose straight and pointed like a dagger, eyebrows curved and beautiful like a bow-frame, eyes dark-blue like a *kateri* blossom, fore-head broad as a *thali*, long golden curly hair, shaming even a maharaja's gold crown as it falls on your neck and shoulders, sinews as tough as the sides of a chariot—with such divine qualities why shouldn't anyone find you attractive?"

"Ashvatthaman, I know for certain that if I tell you the truth, you won't get angry."

"Tell me, Karna."

"Why is it your father didn't find any of these qualities attractive? In these six years did it ever occur to him and his darling Arjuna who Karna is, where he is?"

"What you say is right, Karna. But you are not alone in this. The Nishadha king Hiranyadhanu's son Ekalavya gets the same treatment—and he has come all the way hundreds of *yojanas* from the Nishadha hills to learn the science of weapons. At least I am here to listen to you unburdening your mind. Think what Ekalavya must be thinking of my father! I can't even imagine it. I don't know why father behaves in this atrocious manner. Not all sons get to know what goes on in their fathers' innermost minds."

His explanation was simple and true, and it appealed to me greatly. How would I ever know what went on in my father Adhiratha's mind? Ashvatthaman reminded me of Ekalavya, and a mysterious respect for the unseen but similarly suffering Ekalavya was born in my mind.

30

One day Ashvatthaman and I were standing near the sword-fencing arena. The arena had a boundary on all four sides consisting of massive crowbars. Someone had twisted one of the crowbars till its tip touched the ground. As a result of just one of the crowbars getting bent, the entire pattern looked awry. I put my hand to it in an attempt to straighten it. Ashvatthaman said quickly, "Let it be, Karna. They've all tried. In a fit of anger, Bhima once bent it the way it is now. No one's been able to twist it back into shape again. Only Bhima can do that."

"I see. You want me to straighten it?" I asked, looking into his eyes.

"Even you can't do it."

"*Achcha*?" I removed my footwear and placed them on one side. Tying my shawl round my waist, I said, "I'll straighten this bar with my left hand and bring it back to exactly where it was earlier. Watch me!"

I approached the crowbar, looked up at the sky, where my Guru-deva shone brightly. Concentrating all my energy in my left arm, I closed my eyes, and jerked the bar with all the strength I could summon. The first jerk brought it up to my waist level. Fitting the raised part to my shoulder, and gripping it in my left hand, I slowly twisted it perfectly upright to the earlier symmetry. Ashvatthaman gaped. He placed his hand on my back to pat me. But then he instinctively removed it.

"What's wrong, Ashvatthaman?" I asked, surprised.

"*Arre*, your body is flaming hot!" he replied, giving me a piercing look.

It's very likely Bhima got to see the straightened crowbar some time or other. Every day he would twist one crowbar out of shape. And I made it a point each night to straighten it with my left hand.

31

At the end of each year a massive *yajna* was performed at the military academy. Guru Drona had established a peculiar practice. Every student of the academy had to bring a live animal from the forest as a sacrificial offering at the *yajna*. When questioned about the practice, he had replied that it was conducive to self-reliance and courage.

At one of the annual *yajnas* an unforgettable incident took place. We had all started for the forest in order to bring back a live beast. At the commencement of the forest we fanned out in various directions. I chose the east. As I was walking, it occurred to me I had already earlier offered a deer, an antelope, a wild boar, and other creatures. This year I wanted to offer a more ferocious beast. Which could that be? Elephant? *Chhee!* An ugly, grossly heavy wood smashing creature like that? Horse? No, sir, a horse can be caught, but it will take at least two or more days to do so. By that time the *yajna* would be over. Which then? Spotted deer, wolf? *Chhee!* Which is the most formidable creature of all? The tiger! That's it, it will be a tiger this year! I'd have to go into deep forest though. That was no trouble. Go I would. I made up my mind even as I crossed the edge of the forest.

With long strides and keen glances on all four sides, I moved ahead. I roamed all day in the dense forest, spotted many animals but never a tiger. My wanderings had brought on an intense thirst for water. Evening was about to fall. Birds were returning to their nests. Wiping the sweat off my face, I came to the river called Bahuda. I stood there, and paid homage to the Sun-God, thinking *Your disciple's efforts have been all in vain today.*

I sat down on a black rock and scooped up water in my palms. I was about to sip when a fierce, hulking beast pounced at me from behind. I lost balance and fell in the Bahuda's waters. The beast leapt in after me. The waters frothed. I looked at the animal. A black-and white spotted cheetah! It had come to the ghat in the evening to slake its thirst. Face round like a pumpkin, eyes red like *gunja* berries.

My eyes shone in delight. I was not aware that I was in the river—that my clothes were drenched. He raised his paw to strike me. I grabbed the paw in mid-air and literally dragged him out of the water. But the cheetah seemed to become even more agitated on land. He jerked his paw free. The impact of the water and the resistance I provided aggravated his violence. Fire flashed from his angry eyes. Growling fiercely, he kept attacking me repeatedly. At times he leapt five or six lengths in the air, licking his blood-red tongue greedily as if to lap my blood. Mouth ajar, he jumped at me. I retaliated. I defended myself well for may be half an hour, but it was a losing battle. I glanced at my body. That vicious beast must have clawed at me a hundred times, but there wasn't the faintest

trace of nail-marks or sharp teeth on my body. My skin was impenetrable. He was only *one*—even ten cheetahs could not have devoured me, not even in my sleep. A lightning-current whizzed through my body. Instantaneously, my flesh seemed to blaze up like a whirring chariot-wheel. My body is impenetrable!—the very thought of this made my body glow like a spark. Suddenly I lashed out and punched the cruel creature on his face. He backed away in agony. This was my cue to launch a full-scale attack, one blow after another. With a tightly closed fist I pummelled his back, belly, neck—wherever I could. Getting even more violent, he struck back. An hour passed in this duelling. In the end it was he who tired. Not one drop of my blood had wet his tongue. The horribly-growling cheetah now started whining. Fear made him tuck his tail between his legs. I mounted his chest. The grass, fifteen to twenty arm's-lengths all around us, was flattened and badly crushed. From a nearby bush I felt a wild creeper on my legs. I pulled it towards me. A swift hard tug, and fifteen arm's-lengths of creeper, uprooted, came in my grip. I trussed the front and hind legs of the cheetah with the creeper, making a black-and-white bundle of flesh-and-bone.

Darkness was falling. Lugging that huge beast on my shoulder, I made my way back to town in the soft light of the moon. It was midnight by the time I reached. A biting cold wind numbed my body. I had forgotten to retrieve my shawl from the Bahuda. My wet garments were filthy with dust. The town was deep in sleep. Only the cheetah's growls, like thunder clouds reverberating, could be heard. I reached the military academy. The animals that had been captured by the other students after searching in forest after forest had been incarcerated in a single wooden enclosure. I flung in their midst the cheetah on my shoulder whose whiskers had been tickling my neck all this while. The animals all screamed in terror. I hurried to my room, changed, and went off to sleep.

At dawn the *yájna* ceremony began in accordance with approved custom. Finally came the time for the sacrifice to be offered at the altar. A student entred the enclosure, and dashed back in consternation to the *yajna* platform. He said to Guru Drona, "Gurudeva, someone's brought a cheetah for the sacrifice!"

"Cheetah! Let's go and have a look." His white eyebrows rose in surprise. We followed Guru Drona to the covered enclosure. I was hoping that Guru Drona, after seeing the cheetah, would make enquiries and pat me on the back. But he merely creased his

forehead and said, 'Why has this cheetah been brought here? *Arre*, a *yajna* is performed for peace of mind It is forbidden to sacrifice a cheetah at a *yajna* Set him free "

But none dared step forward to free the cheetah Finally Bhima volunteered He unknotted the creepers I had tied The cheetah was in a state of fear He took a mighty leap over the boundary and vanished in a trice

My hopes were dashed to smithereens I felt the pain, of course, but the truth is that I was disgusted with the glimpse of life that Guru Drona's despicable behaviour gave me Why shouldn't cruel and predatory animals be sacrificed in a *yajna*? Instead of harmless goats animals like cheetahs deserved to be the sacrificial victims

32

Many days passed From the time I came to Hastinapura, I had gone back only once to Champanagari, and that was during the time when Guru Drona was testing his disciples Five years had elapsed since then Much as I wanted to, I wasn't able to visit Champanagari even once during those years—for I had come as a student, to study, wasn t it?

It was my good luck that my guru happened to be so excellent a guru of gurus, indeed My guru was the Sun God himself Surya Deva Standing on the stone platform of Hastinapura's arena, I had made up my mind to become his disciple He in turn treated me as a beloved pupil For six years he introduced me to the secrets of the most esoteric mysteries I can t say what language he taught me in, but whatever he taught, I learnt fast There was nothing he did not teach me The most difficult feats of archery, the complicated holds of hand to hand duels the ways in which to master the ungovernable natures of horses, elephants and camels His advice was always whispered into my ear in tacit communication, the language of silence

Every morning, opening the petals of countless buds with his soft rays he would tell me, ' Karna, learn from this granting to anyone with an open heart whatever he asks for, you must make the lives of all who come in touch with you bloom like a flower "

How great was my guru! Was there ever a guru in this world who gave to his pupil so liberally such lucid advice in such simple ways? It was now time to go at least once to Champanagari and wash my

guru's feet with the pure water of the Ganga. I did not call her Ganga-mata any more, but simply Ganga, because my childhood devotion had been hardened by the stony ways of routine socialising. There is always only one mother—she who gives birth and rears the baby. A river is a river, after all. How can a river be a mother? My mother was Radha-mata. And I had not met her for a long time. What would she think when she saw me? I had no doubt whatever that her first words to me would be, "You look so pulled down, *re* Vasu. I hope you didn't bathe in the Ganga's waters, did you?" It doesn't matter how old a boy grows; in his mother's eyes, he is always a child. A mother is the only person in the world who does not see love in terms of etiquette and measurable behaviour. She only knows how to love her son as he should be loved.

I called Shon and said, "Shon, get ready to leave. We're going to Champanagari tomorrow." His face lit up with joy. We had become as tall and strong as sal-trees—and we were returning home to Champanagari for the first time! Our place of birth!

33

Next day we left Hastinapura. It was a long journey, so we rode two excellent white horses. By this time we had become good horsemen. Among animals, I always preferred the horse. The horse never sits; it bends a hoof and sleeps standing. I had studied the equestrian nature carefully. I knew perfectly how to tame even the most recalcitrant horse. Besides, horses were our family occupation for generations. Uncle Sanjaya had said, "Every man should excel in his profession"—and how could I ignore his advice?

We crossed the city limits of Hastinapura. It was spring: multicoloured flowers graced the countryside, *bava*-trees were clustered with tiny yellow blossoms, catechu trees glowing with light red flowers, *anjani*-trees with blue. The flame-of-the-forest seemed to be blazing with anger seeing the bounty bestowed by Goddess Nature on all these trees: his entire body flamed with blood-red blossoms. It shone in exceptional solitary glory.

A mixed sweet fragrance floated from the flowers into the atmosphere. The eagle, the sheldrake, the *bharadvaja*, the koel, the pigeon—these and other birds congregated during this season. Each sang its melody in the exquisite fifth note. Spring! Spring means—the colourful apotheosis of Mother Nature. Spring

means—the seven musical notes holding hands and playing
kabaddi Spring means—a lovely strand of the earthly vesture of
Mother Nature caught in the trap of time Spring is the anklet
dropped from the pitter pattering feet of giggling Lady Monsoon
when the continuous soft fingers of mischievous rain tickle her.
What's the use? There's no way Spring can be described Spring is
Spring

Our journey continued amidst all these lovely scenes of Mother
Nature At nightfall, we would halt and rest near a city Eight days
passed in this fashion Crossing many rivers and mountains, we
arrived in Prayag on the ninth day Prayag where Ganga, Yamuna,
and Sarasvati unite! Champanagari was only twentyfive *yojanas*
away

Eager to see the confluence of the three rivers, we swerved our
horses towards the *sangam* as soon as we entered the town It was
evening when we arrived The Yamuna's waters were flowing from
Mathura, the Ganga's from Kampilya, and the Sarasvati was swiftly
streaming in from Ayodhya Three clear streams were visible, in
distinct separation the pure-white waters of the Ganga, the darker
shade of the Yamuna, and the reddish tint of the Sarasvati Three
different personalities, yet they flowed hand-in-hand to mingle in
the ocean, united from there on under one enchanting name—
Ganga Seeing that three-braided confluence known as the Triveni,
a strange thought occurred to me How did Nature forget to teach
man the lesson she taught the three rivers so well? Why does man
practise so many contraries of caste and false ideas of high and low?
Which ocean will *these* streams mingle in? What else can come out
of separation and conflict except destruction? Why not man walk
hand in-hand with man, in a spirit of mutual understanding, uniting
all varied streams in one flow? But that of course was wishful
thinking, because rivers are rivers, and human beings are human
beings Man is perhaps the only animal in the world whose folly
makes him dig his own doom

From the commingled waters of the three rivers I scooped an
anjali and offered thanksgiving to the Sun-God, saying, "Deva,
grant me the patient fortitude of these three rivers Grant me the
wisdom to understand others well Let no selfish thoughts touch my
mind "

Our horses drank their fill, and we returned to the town We
walked back holding the reins Some women were also returning to

Naturally Draupadi must be chuckling inwardly at my defeat Dejected, I descended the steps The bow of Shiva felt more and more like a dead weight each second I had held it in my hands longer than anyone else I looked around to get an idea of the spectators' reactions Sri Krishna, raja of the Yadavas, was looking at me silently and smiling inscrutably The others had lowered their heads Like a fool, Karna kept on staring at the feet of black-skinned Sri Krishna I looked angrily at smiling Sri Krishna, as if to say, "*Arre*, what are you grinning for? If you have the courage, why don't you get up and lift the bow and win the contest?" I threw the bow in front of him, but because of my weakened arms the bow did not travel far, instead it slid along the smooth stone floor and swerved back and struck my right foot A sharp jolting pain stabbed me up to my head My mind, hurt by the defeat, and my body, exhausted by the heavy bow, screamed I looked to Jarasandha, seated in front, for help He lowered his head to signify refusal Even in my predicament, I felt sorry for him The pain I felt on being struck by the bow was less than the pain I felt seeing Jarasandha so disconsolate I thought, *Let my foot get crushed, I will not seek anyone's help,* and I closed my eyes The same Duryodhana who a little earlier had come to Jarasandha's rescue was now a victim of the very same bow of Shiva They must all have been upset by this fact, but none came forward to help me My mind writhed like a wounded snake stung from all sides by red ants

Suddenly the whispering in the pavilion intensified One by one, scraps of words assailed my ears "Karna flesh-ear-rings piercing the target finest of archers the true science of archery " Raising my head, I glanced at Karna's seat He had risen and was standing straight, his ear-rings were flaming red, but even when he was standing his eyes were fixed on Sri Krishna's right toe I felt like shouting, "Karna, why is it that your eyes that soar the skies like Garuda are so transfixed by black Krishna's toe?" Before I could do anything, Sri Krishna quietly raised his right toe Smiling the most charming of smiles, Karna turned from his seat and quickly strode towards me His tall impressive frame made it seem as if a huge tree was walking towards me Each step he took made his flesh-ear-rings shake His confident, striking gait so enchanted the spectators that even before he laid hands on the bow they broke into vociferous applause I completely forgot that my foot

was pinned under the bow The excellent jewel I had discovered in the Hastinapura arena was coming towards me, radiating effulgence as he approached

Chhee! How selfish I was! I was going to use Karna to make Draupadi my wife What a feelingless thing to do A fragrant lady like Draupadi would be a perfect match only for a golden flower like Karna Karna and Draupadi together would put even Shiva and Parvati to shame! I changed my mind Very soon Karna would pierce the fish-target Draupadi would then be announced as the Maharani of Anga, and Champanagari proclaimed the capital of Anga Not just that—Karna would be declared the commander of the Kaurava armed forces and given due honour as such And as soon as he returned to Hastinapura, the Maharaja would have to be persuaded to instal Karna as army commander The wedded couple would then ride a ceremonial royal elephant in procession through the streets of Hastinapura All this I decided then and there

He was near me in no time He tucked the end of his shawl at his waist He looked at me only once, and his large, radiant, blue eyes seemed to say, "Upset, king? Why did you have to look to Jarasandha to free you when Karna was standing by?"

With no effort at all he lifted the bow of Shiva with one hand, and before anyone could make out what was happening he had flung the bow up in the air and unerringly caught it in his other hand as it fell, like a small boy playing with a toy My mind and my foot were free The pavilion broke into loud clapping It appeared to me as if the waves of the Ganga, which accepted the *arghya*-offerings of Karna, were applauding

Karna ran like lightning to the edge of the pool and swiftly whisked an arrow out of the quiver lying there This was the identical sharp arrow with which he practised his perfect target-training He strung the bow, pulled it taut, and peered into the pool His eyes rolled in harmony with the swiftly-circling reflection of the whirring fish-target in the pool, searching for the fish-eye His heroic appearance enchanted all the spectators Rippling wrinkles appeared on his bent neck His flawless posture, as he pulled the bowstring, resembled that of a lion about to leap on a deer The eyes of the audience were all on the tip of his sharp arrow Draupadi's eyes travelled from the point of the arrow to the feet of Karna All held their breaths—from expectation, curiosity,

and unadulterated respect for Karna It was the divine moment! The future of the Panchalas and the Kauravas rested on what would happen now to the fish-target Draupadi would now become Karna's wife and make his life radiant. *Chhee*! It was Draupadi's life that was going to become radiant after marriage with Karna It was the one moment crucial to the futures of all—mine, the Kauravas', Aryavarta's, and Sun-disciple Karna's

The whirring fish-target, the eyes of the fish reflected in the pool, and the sharp point of the arrow—Karna aimed at their union and pulled the bowstring right up to his flesh-ear-rings Expectation touched breaking point He was about to release the arrow when a resonant voice from the stone platform pierced the hushed silence and struck the ears of all the spectators

"Wait!"

At first no one could make out who it was All craned their necks towards the stone platform The white-flower marriage-garland trembled One could almost hear hearts palpitating It was Draupadi's voice She had raised the lotus marriage-garland high, and her delicate nostrils were flaring

"Wait!" she shouted "You must not shoot!"

Astonished whispers sped through the pavilion

"Why?" Karna rose, turned his neck, and asked in surprise

"You are not a Kshatriya, I cannot agree to become the wife or the daughter-in-law of a charioteer I am a Kshatriya's daughter, not the daughter of a low-born charioteer "

The hand that had pulled the bowstring taut started trembling incontrollably The bowstring began quivering The arrow that was pointing at the fish-target slipped out aimlessly Speeding towards the seat of Sri Krishna, it flipped downwards and pierced his right toe Akrura, Balarama and Uddhava ran towards Sri Krishna, who did not say a word but motioned them to return to their seats Without moving his leg at all, Sri Krishna stooped and casually pulled the arrow out of his toe, wiping the blood with his yellow robe With absolutely no trace of feeling at all

Seeing that blood pleased me no end

"Low-caste! Son of a charioteer!" Karna turned his face away from the hatred that bubbled in his broken heart and let out a fierce horse-laugh Not an ordinary cachination Not the kind of abusive laughter that comes naturally to women It was a laugh much more hurtful than that His flesh-ear-rings, paling at one

moment and becoming blood-red the next instant, gave an indication of his wounded dignity. He stood undecided, like a stone statue beside the stone pool, unblinkingly staring at the sky-and-earth-burning sun whose rays entered through the arrow-vents in the pavilion's ceiling. The next moment he angrily hurled the shaking bow of Shiva on the carpeted floor. Then, like a furious forest fire, he swept across the hall to his seat and sat with his head down. Wherever his footsteps fell on the carpet, the fibre charred and turned black. Like the ocean turning turbulent on a full-moon night, cyclonic feelings turned Karna's heart chaotic—but to what extent even I couldn't fully make out. Sitting next to him, my body could feel the heated sighs that hissed from his flaring nostrils. All the spectators were silent.

This unbelievable incident stunned and shocked everyone. No one had expected Draupadi, in bridal vesture, to raise her bowed head and speak such terrible words, violating all accepted rules of *svayamvara* etiquette. The speaker was Draupadi, and the person spoken to Karna—which was why no one even dared to intervene.

A deathly silence fell on the pavilion. Draupadi lowered her head once more. A little more than an hour had elapsed since the *svayamvara* began. It was getting on to evening; the sun was slowly setting. Only the whirring of the fish-target could be heard in the pavilion. It would carry on whirring. What fearful music would follow from its whirring, only all-consuming Time would tell—or the fish-target itself.

I looked sympathetically at my friend Karna, raja of Anga, who had promised life-long allegiance to me. He had truly failed life's test. His clothes were soggy with sweat. His body, smarting under the sharp and intolerable insult, throbbed like a *yajna*-fire. But he did not say a word. What was there to say? I wanted to get up and shout before everyone, "Karna is not low-born. Karna is not despicable. Don't dishonour him like this. He is the duly crowned raja of Anga. He is free. His ears have dazzling rings. His body has impenetrable armour. He is the finest!" I was in fact about to rise and announce this when I noticed a bearded and top-knotted Brahmin from the commoners' seats push his way forward through the spectators.

Obvious signs of displeasure were noticable on Raja Drupada's countenance when he realised that no candidate was stepping forward to shoot at the fish-target—and he gave vent to his disgust in bitter words.

"Am I to believe that there isn't a single raja in all Aryavarta worthy of my daughter's hand? A trivial wooden fish has today taken over all Aryavarta—shall I assume this as true and in desperation throw my fragrant daughter back to the god of the *yajna*-fire who gave her to me? Has the glory of the Kshatriyas of this land vanished for ever?"

"No!" The denial came proudly from the lips of the bearded and top-knotted Brahmin in the centre of the audience His body, dressed in saffron, was smeared with ash, so it was impossible to tell the colour of his skin, but his arrow-straight gait looked vaguely familiar to me That gait that gait was so much like Arjuna's Could it be Arjuna himself? My doubt-filled mind trembled No, it was impossible Arjuna had perished long ago His blood-drinking spirit could not be haunting this pavilion Even if it did, it would never dare to touch the sacred bow of Shiva I knew only too well that blood-drinking *pishachas* were afraid of Shiva

That Brahmin youth lifted the bow of Shiva with one hand, as Karna had done The insult that had followed this action of Karna's a brief while ago seemed to have been completely forgotten by all present A bout of clapping honoured the new contender The Brahmin youth turned his face to look at Sri Krishna I felt like cursing the lot of them First he had motioned them to sit, and the rajas had obeyed Karna had kept silently staring at his feet for a long time, and now this Brahmin youth also had turned to look at him Why? What great ideas did they have about Krishna? Was he the king of gods Indra or the world-creator Brahma? Irritated, I swerved my seat in the opposite direction I did not want any of them—Sri Krishna, the Brahmin youth, and the hordes of foolish spectators—I did not want to see any of them in front of my eyes As I turned my seat, I noticed Shishupala facing me He looked at me, surprised, and in the meantime I heard a commotion "Look! The young Brahmin has pierced the fish-target! The contraption that created so many tricky complications is at last stilled Glory to that Brahmin youth! Who is he? From where?"

I quickly turned to look He was standing near the edge of the pool, in saffron robe, his chest puffed with pride He had pierced straight into the fish-eye Who could it be? And why had he not said a word? I flailed my mind-horse with questions

Descending from the stone platform, the lady-of-the-sky Draupadi, with lowered head and bashful gait, approached the Brahmin youth, briefly glanced at him, and quickly placed the white lotus marriage-garland round his neck Exactly at that mo ment the sun set The gloomy shades of evening spread in all directions The *svayamvara* was over, the spectators and partici-pants were preparing to leave, but from behind me Shishupala raised his hands and shouted, "We do not recognise this *svayam-vara* It is a gross insult to all of us that, in an assembly of Kshatriyas, a prayer-chanting Brahmin should win a Kshatriya lady in marriage I will never tolerate this, not even at the cost of my life Stop that bearded man!"

The defeated maharajas loudly approved his command, and began brandishing their weapons I raised my mace In an instant the marriage-pavilion was transformed into a battlefield All commenced attacking the Brahmin youth He replied with volleys of arrows from the bow of Shiva he was carrying They advanced towards him Suddenly there was a fearsome noise like that of a cyclone approaching Another Brahmin youth in saffron, like a veritable hill, gnashing his teeth, pounced on all Seeing him, I felt my heart had stopped beating It was Bhima, the same person with whom I practised the mace for six hours on end—bearded and in disguised dress How did he come here? How was he alive? Who were the ones that perished in Purochana's burning lac hut? Did he send up hemp and flax in flames, or did he really incinerate the hopes and desires of Crown Prince Duryodhana? As was my habit, I raised my hand to feel the silver amulet on my left arm, but precisely at that instant—I don't know from where—a *bastika* arrow whizzed into my arm The amulet snapped and fell on the ground, and was crushed under who knows whose feet I tugged at the feathered end of the arrow, in an attempt to wrench it out of my arm It never occurred to me that it was a *bastika* shaft Its tip remained embedded in my arm, and its end broke off in my fist

I was at my wits' end with all these bitter abuses and insults Trying to convince myself that all was a figment of my imagina-tion, I shook myself awake, and turned my attention to the second Brahmin Yes, it was Bhima His eyes scattered fire Like a farmer's bullocks trampling the reaped harvest to separate grain from chaff, he was spreading confusion all around with his mace Only Shalya somehow stood his ground Like an intoxicated ele-

phant, he was grievously wounding any hero who came within the orbit of his massive mace Struck by his mace, hero after hero rolled his eyes upward and collapsed, screaming in agony. That cyclonically powerful body, egging itself to further fury, bellowed sporadically like a mad bull Even the stilled wooden fish in the suspended target trembled in the thunderous reverberation of his roars No doubt of it—it was Bhima But where had he come from? And how? From the sky, or from the underworld? Had he gone and battered Yama the god of death with his huge mace? His orgiastic dance made the entire pavilion totter If he went on dancing and bellowing in this fashion for another hour, the pavilion would no doubt cave in Everything had happened to me except my losing my senses How could Bhima be alive? Fear made my mind lament Like a foot crushed under a chariot wheel, feeling no sensation whatsoever, my mind had become numb Bhima was apparently out to kill everyone in sight Was it Bhima, or was it Bhima's revenging, blood-drinking spirit? What is real and what is a dream?—I couldn't tell How was he able to assume this stupendous new shape after the Varanavata conflagration? Had Purochana betrayed me, or was my fate conspiring against me?

I steadied myself as best I could and tried to slip out of the stampede Bhima was staring at me and bellowing in rage, but he was surrounded by Shalya, Sudamana, Shishupala, Jarasandha, Sushena and others The target piercing hero Arjuna was standing near Draupadi and protecting her from any molestation Like streams of rain during the monsoon, a continuous flow of arrows was released by Arjuna from the bow of Shiva His countless arrows had already shredded the ceiling of the pavilion In the slowly spreading darkness, some attendants had brought huge torches to prevent further confusion But most took advantage of the light to launch further attacks on Bhima and Arjuna Chaos and atrocity increased My mind was numb

I emerged from the pandemonium with the greatest difficulty All the rajas were involved in furious fights The seating enclosure was empty Crown Prince Dhrishtadyumna and his father were beseeching all to keep calm, their appeals could be heard even from a distance I could see Karna sitting far away in that enclo sure He sat there with head bowed and held between both hands Lacerated by the word arrows of Draupadi, that great hero sat

there in introspective dejection I ran towards him Placing my hand on his strong back, I shook him hard, and shouted, "Karna, Arjuna is alive He has won the hand of Draupadi in the *svayamvara* He does not allow anyone to come anywhere near him in the pavilion A devastating battle is going on I can't make out what's happening "

Like an alert lion bounding up at the fall of a twig on his back, and roaring, Karna instantly stood up "Arjuna! Arjuna! Arjuna! I'll show him today that, if he so desires, even a charioteer's son can abduct a princess in front of Arjuna's very eyes "

He turned with lightning speed His face was red with anger His flesh-ear-rings glowed Pushing me aside, he leapt towards the pool in the middle of the pavilion He snatched the bow from Bhojaraj who was standing nearby Stopping near Arjuna, he shouted at everyone, "Make way!" His words were thunderous one felt clouds were roaring All stood stockstill ' Arjuna, if you are the Kshatriya you think you are, then use the Shiva bow and shred the head of Karna, the charioteer's son, and take away this surpassingly lovely Panchala lady For if you don't, I will show her this very instant that the Arjuna whom she has selected as a Kshatriya is fodder for the arrow of Karna " He said this passionately Arjuna readied the bow of Shiva A clash between the two was imminent—thinking this, Draupadi clung fearfully to Arjuna Arjuna edged her away from him and strung the bow Karna sliced the arrow in mid-air They began showering arrows on each other They shot invincible arrows in the fading light of the torches, but all the shafts were intercepted and destroyed in flight For about an hour the inconclusive duel raged

Bhima and Shalya were still fighting with each other The whole appearance of the *svayamvara* pavilion had been changed into that of a scorched battlefield The pool in the centre was littered with arrows Water began spilling over The ceiling was in tatters The wedding garland that Draupadi had placed round Arjuna's neck fell on the ground, snapped by Karna's arrows But there seemed to be no end of the duel in sight Both were at it hammer and tongs The clash of arrows produced blinding sparks

And then, before anyone knew it, it was all over All looked astonished at the two heroes Sri Krishna was standing between them on a heap of arrows, with his arms upraised In spite of the horrendous battle, he spoke without raising his voice, and smiling,

"Karna, Arjuna, wait *Arre*, give time at least to the Panchalas to produce more arrows for you The arrows of the armoury are exhausted, and the rules of war are clear, an arrow once fired cannot be re-used " He smiled again and, adjusting his blue shawl on his yellow dress, he strode out of the palace of the Panchalas

Astonished, Karna and Arjuna felt their quivers There wasn't a single arrow left Arjuna flung away the bow of Shiva in disgust Draupadi's marriage-garland was crushed under it Karna also turned back I placed my hand on his sweat-drenched shoulder My palm burned with the heat of his body, but I was least concerned about that At least we had a hero to challenge Arjuna—that gave me delight and taught me the virtue of patience I said to him, "Karna, we can't stay in this city even a second more An insult to you is an insult to Duryodhana "

"Raja of Anga, a very unpleasant incident has occurred in this fearful clash Your son, rushing to help you " Ashvatthaman said, and stopped His head was bowed, his eyes moist

"Where is Sudamana? Why are you silent, Ashvatthaman?" He shook Ashvatthaman Beads of sweat jerked off his curly golden hair and plopped on Ashvatthaman's head-gear Karna's eyes, flaming coals, searched the pavilion for a glimpse of his son

"Your son, Raja of Anga, is resting eternally," Ashvatthaman chokingly said, pointing to the corpse of Sudamana on a mound of arrows

"Sudamana!" Karna lifted his head, shouted, and ran towards his unreplying son Near his feet lay Draupadi's marriage-garland He kicked at it in his rage The next instant he was on his knees beside his dear son, taking the lifeless hand in his, Karna, who an instant ago was warring with the ferocity of a lion, sobbed in grief Ashvatthaman placed his hand on Karna's shoulder and somehow succeeded in guiding him out of the pavilion Three different burdens lay heavy on Karna's mind insult, victory-deprivation, and grief for his dead son

On a sign from us, our attendants lifted Sudamana's corpse Karna's son was born in Hastinapura, and he had died while rushing to his father s assistance in the pavilion of the Panchalas

At the time of leaving the city, we cremated Sudamana beside the bank of the Ganga, I will never forget in all my life the absolute stillness that prevailed during the last rites The rippling waves of the Ganga were surely repeating to Karna, "Karna, your

son is no more Show Arjuna what a father's grief is by killing *his* son " The extraordinarily patient raja of Anga lit the pyre with fire taken from a torch The distorted, frightening flames as they leapt up to the sky cast long shadows on the lapping waves of the Ganga We offered Sudamana to the god Agni and left Kampilyanagar with heavy hearts

13

That dark night itself we were back in Hastinapura But my mind was restless Wherever I looked, whatever I did—lifting a bowl of milk, picking up a fragrant flower, gazing at the celebrated sceptre of the Kauravas—made me see Bhima everywhere He seemed to be gnashing his teeth and rushing at me Memories of Bhima were a flame in which I burned every instant I was the Crown Prince A single word from me would send hundreds of warriors pouncing on Bhima with brandished swords, Duhshasana, Grandsire Bhishma, Guru Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthaman, Vrishavarman and the huge army of the Kauravas were all ready to defend me to the last Yet I was beset by fear The truth is that no man can feel safe if he has to depend for his security by leaning on another man's shoulder The first thing to do is make one's own mind fear-free Seeing Bhima, I tried to collect all the stray threads of my mind into one But they had scattered far too much I kept repeating to myself, "Duryodhana, you are a heroic warrior Why do you tremble at the thought of Bhima? You are a mace hero At the right time, forget the others, and rush straight at Bhima with your club whirling Don't unnerve yourself like this " I did try my best to console my mind but, like a mosquito in summer droning in front of one's eyes, the image of Bhima was always standing right in front of me My mind ached to find someone who would offer words of consolation Not knowing why, I started sending my attendant Prabhanjana to Karna He would come as soon as the attendant reached him, and then a few hours would pass so easily I began to feel that just the fact of his presence made life so much more bearable and livable But I never praised him to his face I knew that, like Purochana, he too was born for my sake Besides, a raja should never indulge in praise of anyone That was a lesson the noble Kanaka had taught me Sometimes Ashvatthaman would come along with Karna He

would say such remarkable things that my mind became engrossed But the moment he left, what he had said appeared to me no more than fanciful philosophising After the *svayamvara* of Draupadi, he came to me once with Karna Karna had come to suggest that, in the games to be held in the capital fifteen days from now, chariot-competitions should be included. He seemed to have no other interest in this world except horses, chariots, weapons, sun-reverence, archery, and wrestling

I readily agreed to his suggestion regarding the games I said to him pleasantly, "Karna, life is a game too "

"Then we should make every effort to win," he replied in the same tone

"It's not that easy," Ashvatthaman interrupted casually

"Why?" I asked

"No one knows the length and breadth of the arena where life's competition is held "

Ashvatthaman always had something profound to say This we all knew So I asked, "Where will you find such an unearthly place in this world?"

"The field of the mind Man has been participating in this field for thousands of years with the resplendent chariot of his desires But Time, the impartial judge, has never so far declared him winner " Ashvatthaman's voice was sweeter than a flute-song

"So should we refuse to take part in this competition?" I asked him this because I could not find myself agreeing with him

"Never Because each man's life is tied inexorably to his karma Man's mind is merely an obedient servant who faithfully follows the auspicious or baneful messages he receives from the primeval Mind-Womb "

"The mind! The mind! Ashvatthaman, the mind you speak of—how many strands go to its making?" I couldn't decipher the depth of his words

"How many hairs are there under that shining golden crown? Can you tell me the exact number? The mind's threads are as countlessly numerous Some say life is like that—a fabric of lovely threads But this is also not exactly correct "

"Meaning?" Karna interrupted

"Life is not just a fabric woven by the countless threads of the mind, it is an unopenable knot of this fabric Each person has to untie that knot in his or her own way, and that he can do only by opening the eyes of his inner self "

"What then is this thing called truth? Is truth this knot that you have described?" I teased him

"No Truth is that which is eternal Seen from this viewpoint, truth seems to me to be always this—the countless rays of the sun Since time immemorial these rays have been gifted to the earth Has that made any change in their divine source? Have they ever departed from their divine dharma of touching everything? King, can you show another such faultless truth?"

He paused briefly, and continued, "Life is a divine light that emanates from the sun He who realises this, makes his life radiant, no less That is why it is my great desire to have Karna always with me—because he has always been a devotee of the sun Look at his happy face! Doesn't it look like the orb of the sun?"

"Ashvatthaman, what you say has my total agreement But why doesn't your father, Guru Drona, also agree to this?" I asked this pointed question while looking at Karna

"King, let me remind you again that life is a knot of the countless threads of the mind Every individual has to untie that knot in his or her own way I mine, you yours, Karna Karna's, my father his No one else can help anyone in this matter "

Again he had made me speechless He was an intelligent acharya's son, after all

14

I did try to apply the life-truths uttered by Ashvatthaman to the course of my everyday activities, but they seemed to be completely mismatched It was his contention that life is a knot of the countless threads of the mind, and each person unties his knot all by himself I wasn't prepared to accept any of this First of all, I couldn't understand how the mind could be compared to a fabric It seemed more like a weapon to me—like a mace, for instance Which mace allows anyone to come within its range? The human mind is like that Each has his own life-field Each person stands firm in the centre of that field and furiously whirls the mace of his thoughts all around him Anyone in striking range gets hit Someone's chest is smashed, and someone is finished for ever But it's best not to think of the results, or nothing will ever get done

I tried to shake off Ashvatthaman's ideas, but they haunted my mind—and that upset me I felt defeated and irritated, and I resolved *Ashvatthaman, if as you say life is a knot of the countless*

threads of the mind—very well, I accept it But I am not going to untie that knot I'll make it knottier And I'll squeeze that rakshasa Bhima in that knot till he's dead

The thought of squeezing Bhima in life's knot calmed my mind Bhima had slipped through one net No matter—I planned to weave a stronger net for him I would carry on making one net after another for Bhima all my life I wasn't now going to put his finger inside a silver amulet, I would bury his head under the very throne of the Kauravas—because the blue-skinned Arjuna had won Draupadi in the *svayamvara* of the Panchalas and, in the clash that ensued, huge Bhima had smashed his mace right across my back

And there was one other incident that made me feel I was exceptionally lucky The way Draupadi humiliated Karna God had exposed her meanness in front of everybody Now I could go on reminding Karna of that insult and fanning that powerful hero to further fury And Karna was sure to take revenge against Draupadi should the opportunity ever present itself He was now my right hand, but soon he would be fully in my clutches Karna! Sun-worshipping Karna! Karna of the flesh-ear rings and body-armour! Massive-bodied Karna! He would be utterly in my grip! I would twist his life any way I pleased The lord of Hastinapura with Karna in his clutches! The world would see this beautiful dream of Duryodhana turn into a living reality

I could not forget one distressing incident in the midst of all this confusion In the clash following the *svayamvara*, Arjuna had literally ripped apart Karna's son Sudamana with his gruesome arrows Some arrows had even mutilated his handsome, youthful face How little of life had that heroic son seen! Who would dare describe Arjuna as a hero, with the death of Sudamana in mind? If Karna now vowed to take Arjuna's life, who would dare describe him as a felon? Ethics is not big idealistic declarations only, it is also a matter of living, practical everyday experience

BOOK 5

VRISHALI

1

A woman's life is a lotus offered with shraddha and bhakti at the feet of her husband Her husband s happiness is her happiness She takes a sacred vow to become his other half in front of the fire god on the occasion of the seven-sacred-steps ceremony I did all I could night and day to make my husband perfectly happy, because Shon had many times told me everything about my husband's anguished background I considered myself very fortunate because my husband's good looks would make any woman envious Even more magnetic than his good looks was his noble mind He must have taken birth for the sole purpose of pleasing others He hadn't the least conceit about his blameless personality Never in conversation did he make any reference to his divine flesh-ear-rings and body-armour Seeing such an accom plished person—who was also the raja of a kingdom—applying sandal paste respectfully on the feet of his parents made me feel truly proud Which wife is not flattered with a talented and hand-some husband? My life was happy, I was like a creeper twining securely around a firm-rooted tree My mother-in-law and father-in-law were god-like I never felt I was a daughter-in law, I was always treated like their own daughter And Shon-ji was a bubbling fountain of jokes—the epitome of reserve with others and a cascade of conversation with me Not a single day passed without my ears receiving his loving syllables "*Bhabhi! Bhabhi!*" I was the first to get news from him of goings-on in the capital and the palace

I was very puzzled by the fact that no one ever brought up the subject of his marriage I used to tell my father-in-law, "You must really love your eldest son very much, or you would have got Shon-ji married too by this time " He would reply, laughing, "I never feel that as my duty My duty was to see Karna married That was my only contentment It's up to Karna now to get Shon married, or to let him stay single "

I did on occasion bring up the matter of Shon's marriage in front my *pati-deva* He would reply, "Vrishali, I've heard that women are

threads of the mind—very well, I accept it. But I am not going to untie that knot. I'll make it knottier. And I'll squeeze that rakshasa Bhima in that knot till he's dead.

The thought of squeezing Bhima in life's knot calmed my mind. Bhima had slipped through one net. No matter—I planned to weave a stronger net for him. I would carry on making one net after another for Bhima all my life. I wasn't now going to put his finger inside a silver amulet, I would bury his head under the very throne of the Kauravas—because the blue-skinned Arjuna had won Draupadi in the *svayamvara* of the Panchalas and, in the clash that ensued, huge Bhima had smashed his mace right across my back.

And there was one other incident that made me feel I was exceptionally lucky. The way Draupadi humiliated Karna. God had exposed her meanness in front of everybody. Now I could go on reminding Karna of that insult and fanning that powerful hero to further fury. And Karna was sure to take revenge against Draupadi should the opportunity ever present itself. He was now my right hand, but soon he would be fully in my clutches. Karna! Sun-worshipping Karna! Karna of the flesh-ear-rings and body armour! Massive bodied Karna! He would be utterly in my grip! I would twist his life any way I pleased. The lord of Hastinapura with Karna in his clutches! The world would see this beautiful dream of Duryodhana turn into a living reality.

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BOOK 5

VRISHALI

1

A woman's life is a lotus offered with shraddha and bhakti at the feet of her husband Her husband's happiness is her happiness She takes a sacred vow to become his other half in front of the fire god on the occasion of the seven-sacred-steps ceremony I did all I could night and day to make my husband perfectly happy, because Shon had many times told me everything about my husband's anguished background I considered myself very fortunate because my husband's good looks would make any woman envious Even more magnetic than his good looks was his noble mind He must have taken birth for the sole purpose of pleasing others He hadn't the least conceit about his blameless personality Never in conversation did he make any reference to his divine flesh-ear-rings and body-armour Seeing such an accomplished person—who was also the raja of a kingdom—applying sandal paste respectfully on the feet of his parents made me feel truly proud Which wife is not flattered with a talented and handsome husband? My life was happy, I was like a creeper twining securely around a firm-rooted tree My mother-in-law and father-in-law were god-like I never felt I was a daughter-in-law, I was always treated like their own daughter And Shon-ji was a bubbling fountain of jokes—the epitome of reserve with others and a cascade of conversation with me. Not a single day passed without my ears receiving his loving syllables "*Bhabhi! Bhabhi!*" I was the first to get news from him of goings-on in the capital and the palace

I was very puzzled by the fact that no one ever brought up the subject of his marriage I used to tell my father-in-law, "You must really love your eldest son very much, or you would have got Shon-ji married too by this time " He would reply, laughing, "I never feel that as my duty My duty was to see Karna married That was my only contentment. It's up to Karna now to get Shon married, or to let him stay single "

I did on occasion bring up the matter of Shon's marriage in front my *pati-deva* He would reply, "Vrishali, I've heard that women are

a jealous breed What proof is there you won't be jealous of Shon's bride?" He would always tease me in this manner, but I knew the love hidden in the sarcasm, and so I kept silent My reply was, "I look on Shon-ji as my elder brother How can you be jealous of an elder brother's wife?"

"Vrishali, don't ride imaginary horses of impossible relationships Shall I tell you the truth? You don't want your husband to be trapped in loving others When you say, 'Shon should get married', all you mean is that the time which I now spend with Shon will be free and you will have all of me to yourself Isn't that true? How selfish you wives are!"

These remarks of his irritated me, so I would go, stand before the window and gaze at the Ganga Then he would come from behind and caress my hair and say, "Don't be upset, Vrishali *Arre*, I just can't make out anything Shon is still for me the sweet and simple Shon who collects sea-shells on the Ganga's sands, who asks, 'Bhaiya, will you soar high up in the sky like Garuda?', who runs shouting and crying behind my chariot, who dashes forward to rescue the kitten from the onrushing chariot wheels I don't feel that he has grown up But I'm not going to delay any more His wedding will be even more grand than mine Look at him—he's grown up really tall and sturdy, hasn't he?"

At these times I felt like resting my head on his broad shoulder I thought What a large-hearted mind there must be in his splendid body! His life had seen many ups and downs—yet he had kept childhood memories of his beloved brother fresh in the recesses of his mind Very likely Shon-ji had forgotten those incidents—but my husband had kept them very much alive I was lucky to receive as my husband a man who loved me with all his heart and placed everyone in the orbit of his loving attention All the good deeds I had done in all my past births had finally been rewarded It wasn't that only his family members showered me with affection because I happened to be married to him—even Maharani Gandhari Devi, Princess Duhshala and the Queen Mother Kunti Devi loved me intensely I was a charioteer's daughter, but I had become a Queen because of my *pati deva*, which is why I devoted myself night and day to his happiness He never brought up any distressing subject before me The way he was insulted by Acharya Kripa and Crown Prince Bhima in the arena was never told to me He could never think of hurting others for any reason It was Shon who told me of

any incident that hurt my husband. Deep in brotherly love, he would say, "*Bhabhi*, bhaiya is not going to tell you anything, no matter how serious the problem is. That's why I tell you everything myself. I can't bear to see him suffering. I can't tell him anything, because you know what the proverb says, 'Small mouth, big words!' It's up to you to look after him."

My husband had calmly digested even the insult he received from the Panchalas at Draupadi's *svayamvara*. Thinking it would hurt me, he had not breathed a word of it to me. I finally got news of it from Shon. When I heard all the details of what happened in the pavilion, I was roused to anger for the first time in my life against the heartless and conscienceless princess called Draupadi. Later I actually felt sorry for her. The bowl of nectar was almost in her grasp, but that unthinking woman kicked it aside in a fit of high-caste pride. She had trodden to dust a golden fragrant flower worthy of adorning a crown. In front of everyone she had openly and grievously insulted my respectworthy husband. She had been responsible for the death of my son.

When the Raja of Anga returned from Panchala, I asked him worriedly even as I offered him the *arati*-homage, "Where is our son Sudamana?" He gazed deep into my eyes, his voice was choked. Two tear drops slipped out of his blue eyes, rolled down his red cheeks, and fell on my feet. They burned like sparks. He turned his face aside and, wiping his eyes, replied, "Vrishu, Sudamana is no more. His murderer Arjuna, who placed the marriage-garland round Draupadi's neck, will now answer for it with his last breath—his death caused by an arrow fired from the bow of Sudamana's father." He picked up a flower from my *arati-thali* as a token of his pledge. As soon as I heard of Sudamana's death, the *thali* fell from my hands.

2

A wife should forget her problems and alleviate others' sorrows. No one teaches an understanding wife how to reduce the anguish of her husband. I had carefully noticed how the spear of the *svayamvara* bit into the mind of the Maharaja. He lost interest in everything. For hours he brooded. Once, after meal time, he was lost in thought, and I suddenly went and stood in front of him. He saw me, laughed out loud, and said, "You, Vrishali!"

"Some people never say lies, but they laugh lies I have found that out today," I replied

"What lie is who laughing? No one can see you and laugh lies "

"You can You are the one laughing lies You are the one covering up your sorrows "

"What sorrows?"

"Sudamana And the *svayamvara* The insults that have so upset your mind "

"Vrishali, what you say is true But who's been telling you all this?"

"Shon-ji But what I want to know is—what is there so terrible that upsets you so much?"

"To understand this you'll have to be born a man and specially a warrior Or you'll never know what it is to have the spear of an insult always sticking in your mind Vrishali, am I really so mean, so low-born?" He said this, staring at the distant horizon from the window

"No Whoever brands you low will one day have to repent for it My mind tells me this all the time "

"Can I ask you something? Promise you'll speak the truth "

"I have never spoken a lie to you, and I never will You are my lord "

"Doesn't it ever come to your mind how wonderful it would have been if your husband were not a charioteer's son?"

"Why? Why should that enter my mind? I don't like this question of yours at all You have no shortcomings "

"Why then do I get so angry when I hear the words 'charioteer's son'?"

"Must be that the wickedness of the world gets to be too much for you, and then you get upset the way you do But please don't brood on how cruel others are, because "

"Because?"

"Because our two lives "

"What's the matter, Vrishali? Why have you suddenly stopped? What about our two lives?"

"Our two lives are not ours any more There's a third coming to share in our lives You are going to be a father soon "

"What are you saying, Vrishali? A father soon? We'll have a son! Vrishali, why did you take so long to tell me?" He cupped my face in his hands Try however hard I did, my eyes refused to look

up at him He caressed me gently, and said tenderly, "Vrishu, look at me, please "

I looked at his calm blue eyes and his flesh-ear-rings I recalled Draupadi She had indeed done me a great favour Had she seen him at such close quarters, she would never have let him return to Hastinapura He looked at me and said seriously, "Vrishu, boy or girl?"

"What would you prefer?"

"A girl A girl, with eyes as big as yours "

"Uh-huh A son, with flesh-ear-rings like yours," I said, freeing my face from his hands

"So that I get neglected by you! I'm told a son means a wife starts loving her husband less "

"There's only one thing now that can remove my love for you—and that's death "

"Vrishali, you've brought me such divine gifts " His moist eyes were swimming in the ocean of my heart

"Does a god need divine gifts?" That I had managed to please him, pleased me even more Since his return from the *svayamvara*, this was the first time that he had spoken so relaxedly with me But the next instant he became silent He went to the window and started gazing blankly outside

"What's wrong?" I asked apprehensively

"Nothing You can go now " Again he was hiding something from me

"Are you always going to keep me at a distance?"

"No, Vrishali But all things are not meant to be blurted out Nor are they deserving to be understood They can be very bitter "

"No matter how bitter a thing might be, coming from your lips it becomes as sweet as nectar," I retorted stubbornly

"No "

"I won't press you to tell me, but a wife is the better half of a husband If you want me to go away thinking this is not true, I will "

"It's not that Will you be able to take it? Listen then You are the happiest woman on earth thinking we are going to have a son For a moment that thought made me forget my pain too But now I feel that it has served only to increase my earlier grief "

"Why do you say such things? How can the happy news that you will have a son increase your grief?"

"Supposing some other woman, charmed by your husband's valour, gets attracted to him, won't that be a problem for you?"

"No problem at all It's all a question of who my husband fancies If he admires and likes that woman, I shall gladly accept her as a sister Problem or not, it will certainly be an interesting experience "

"Think it over, Vrishali, it's not all that easy "

"I am Vrishali I am the wife of the Raja of Anga," I replied with equal firmness

My reply delighted him He took my hand in his and said lovingly, "Tomorrow I will accompany Crown Prince Duryodhana to the kingdom of Kalinga Look after yourself Sudamana is again taking birth in your womb "

My hand was clasped in his, but my mind was wandering in the kingdom of Kalinga What kind of a woman was she, Princess Bhanumati of the Kalingas? And her capital Kashipura?

4

The next day Crown Prince Duryodhana, the Maharaja, and various other members of the royal family set out for Kashipura, the capital of Kalinga I prayed for the successful completion of their journey, visiting the Gouri-Shankara temple daily for this purpose I don't know why but every time I went to the temple I wanted to go in the blue silk sari that Queen Mother Kunti Devi had presented me In her remembrance, I had preserved it very carefully, as I did my very life The day I heard from Princess Duhshala that she had perished along with her five sons in the Varanavata forest-fire, I took it out from the chest where I had stored it and, burying my face in it, I sobbed uncontrollably It seemed to me that the good, loving, sweet-speaking Queen Mother had wrapped the most precious affection of her life in that sari and given it to me

But—her son Arjuna had snatched from me my most priceless royal vesture It was not possible for me to forget Sudamana, and it was not possible for me to forgive Arjuna

On the occasion of Draupadi's *svayamvara*, when it became obvious that the Pandavas were alive, I shook the maid who brought me the news, urging her to inform me immediately whether the Queen Mother Kunti Devi was safe or no I don't know

why, but Kunti Devi to me was always like a pure and noble goddess

There was of course a difference of opinion between the Pandavas and my husband There was a special clash of minds with Arjuna Referring to Arjuna, I always reminded him, "Why do you find him so uncongenial? You have no kinship with the Kauravas nor any rights to their kingdom "

And his reply was, "What kinship has the planet Rahu Ketu with the moon, and yet it eclipses the moon, doesn't it? The assaults of the lightning crackling in the sky shatter the earth—but does the earth have any kinship with lightning? Similarly, Arjuna is a dam that blocks the flow of my life's river at every step You'll never understand all this, Vrishali "

Then he recounted to me the details of his first encounter with Arjuna in the military academy, and concluded with, "An ink-black snake fell out of the sky from the talons of the soaring bird-king Garuda and dropped in the space between us " Every time I heard this my body shivered with goose-flesh fear My feminine apprehensions made me see this as an ill omen But I was a brave warrior's wife, so I would push away the misgiving from my mind

That the Queen Mother Kunti Devi was safe and sound, made me feel happy My husband also respected her greatly He always said, "My enmity is with Arjuna and with his allegedly invincible valour There is no cause for me to be at odds with his mother and brothers "

News that the Pandavas had survived sent a wave of joy through the city of Hastinapura The citizens were asking each other when the Pandavas would return A corner of my mind also felt relieved because they were alive The truth is, every woman wishes the happiness and prosperity of all, at least, a lady with a family has no other desire But—but it was not possible for me to forgive Prince Arjuna

5

My husband had been away in Kalinga for three weeks After a month Maharaja Duryodhana's trusted envoy Prabhanjana brought all the news of Kashipura to Hastinapura Listening to him roused a medley of thoughts and feelings After hearing all

that Prabhanjana had to say, I felt even more proud of my husband's bravery, generosity and friendship

Innumerable rajas from many kingdoms had gathered in Kashipura on the occasion of the *svayamvara* of Kalinga's princess Kashipura was hundreds of *yojanas* away from Hastinapura, in the extreme eastern region, the eastern ocean was a few *yojanas* further The fame of Princess Bhanumati's beauty had drawn all these rajas to that very distant kingdom Among them were the illustrious rulers Jarasandha, Shrigala, Kratha, Shishupala, Dandadhara and others No conditions were laid down for the *svayamvara* Princess Bhanumati, marriage garland in hand, would move in the pavilion, and choose that raja for husband, at whose feet she would offer the flower of her life, by placing the garland round his neck

As soon as the marriage pavilion filled with the invited rajas, she entered as announced, holding the garland

First in line was Raja Shishupala She cast a fleeting glance at him, and moved on Next Shrigala, whom also she did not favour Then Dandadhara She rejected him because he had bloodshot eyes Next sat Raja Jarasandha of Magadha, but Bhanumati passed him by The fifth seat was Raja Duryodhana's, behind whom stood my revered husband Bhanumati raised her head to look at Duryodhana and in a flash her gaze fell on my be-all-and-end-all husband She stared fixedly at him Seeing this, Duryodhana sprang up from his seat and, before anyone could guess what was happening, he had grasped her firmly round her narrow waist and swiftly swung her up on his shoulder, facing all he shouted, 'It was Bhishma who first took my grandmother from Kashi by force, and today I also am taking away the Princess of Kalinga by the strength of my arms Let anyone who objects be ready to face the might of the Kauravas "

All the rajas stood up Whirling his mace and brushing aside the few rajas who were standing near the main door of the pavilion, Prince Duryodhana expertly made his way out My brother Satyasena had stationed the chariot conveniently near the entrance Prince Duryodhana smoothly swept the arms and-legs flailing Bhanumati inside the chariot as if she were a flower Satyasena whipped the chariot horses An angry group of rajas rushed to give chase, but found the entrance blocked by the Raja of Anga Shishupala shouted, "Karna, Raja of Anga! Make way! All the Kshatriyas here have been grossly insulted '

"Shishupala, if you are the Kshatriya you say you are, fight this friend of Duryodhana, Karna the son of a charioteer Remember, Raja Duryodhana is a mighty Kaurava sword sheathed in the scabbard of Karna If you dare to touch the sword, remember first to destroy the scabbard "

Along with Shishupala, Kratha, Shrigala and ten other rajas launched a concerted attack on Karna Prabhanjana stood behind my husband and kept passing him arrows The arrows shrouded the rajas like mist enveloping a river A deadly battle ensued All the companions of Shishupala shot arrows in swift succession on the solitary Raja of Anga, but to no effect because of the impenetrable skin-armour Exhausted, they found they were unable to advance a single step towards the entrance In fact, my husband's arrows fatally wounded Dandadhara and Shrigala It took an hour for Shishupala to realise what was happening In a fury, he flung aside his bow and shouted, "*Arre*, this is the Karna who was born with impenetrable skin armour You can't slice that armour even with the sharpest weapon Friends, the Princess is lost for ever! Don't lose your lives for no reason!" The rajas screamed, as if stung by poisonous snakes Then they became still, pulling long faces Elephant-strong Jarasandha, having thrown his bow aside, pushed ahead and, striking his palm on the sceptre, he challenged Karna, 'You! Cunning Karna of the impenetrable armour! I, Jarasandha, Raja of Magadha, challenge you to a duel You low-born charioteer, you parasite of a mushroom who thrives in the shadow of Duryodhana! Do you think noble Kshatriya ladies are lost and helpless mares to yoke to your chariot? Come down!"

'Jarasandha, if I could tear off my skin armour, I would gladly do so this instant and show you that even without it I am invincible You intoxicated Kshatriya ox, have you forgotten the time in Draupadi's *svayamvara* when your feet were pinned under the bow of Shiva? A duel means a fight to the death Remember that before you wag your tongue!"

'Son of a charioteer, I have propitiated Shiva and become invincible in duel—or don't you know that? I'll twist you to pulp like a python squeezing a deer!" He again clapped and challenged my husband The other rajas held their breath My husband flung his shawl on Prabhanjana's shoulder and tightened his dress His flesh ear-rings were aflame, and his body swelled like the ocean at full tide

A heart-shattering duel started The *svayamvara* pavilion was transformed into a combat arena Biting his lips, Jarasandha pounced on my husband like a famished tiger But like a massive ocean hurling aside a puny boat, my husband shrugged off his attacker Then, changing his strategy, he began circling his opponent, and for no apparent reason started clapping provocatively But in no time at all my husband had pinned Jarasandha under his thighs and twined his arms like a rope-noose around Jarasandha's neck Jarasandha choked, his eyes started rolling, he was trapped in the 'Thorny Arm" hold His death was certain A Kshatriya raja was about to be sacrificed in the *svayamvara* pavilion Jarasandha raised his arm to signal for help No one came forward Maharaja Chitrangada horripilated in fear, but a part of his mind was secretly rejoicing His daughter was going to be the Maharani of a Kaurava kingdom which had such magnificent heroes as my husband He quickly stepped forward, caught hold of my husband s feet, and mumbled, "Maharaja Karna, Jarasandha has lost Spare his life The Magadha kingdom adjoins ours It is best that we do not become enemies "

My husband spared Jarasandha's life by releasing the "Thorny Arm" hold Everyone present had the feeling that Jarasandha would slip away silently, with his head bowed in humiliation Exactly the opposite happened As soon as he was freed from the hold, Jarasandha embraced my husband, lifted my husband's right arm high, and said, "From today the Raja of Anga, Karna, has become Raja Jarasandha's life-long friend I hereby announce the gift of the city of Malini to this extraordinarily valiant fighter of duels I have never seen his equal in duel in all my life "

My husband reciprocated Jarasandha's embrace The news spread through Kashipura like wildfire Crowds of citizens turned up at the palace for a darshan of my husband With Chitrangadaji's permission, my husband traced out Maharaja Duryodhana and Princess Bhanumati The citizens had taken Princess Bhanumati to the bank of the Mahanadi river and were waiting there for my husband to come The chief minister of Kalinga, explaining everything to them, respectfully escorted them back to the palace

With shouts of "Maharani of Hastinapura!" the citizens of Kashipura bid farewell to Princess Bhanumati, interspersing their leave-taking with victory cries of "Anga-raja Karna!" My husband left to the accompaniment of showers of flowers

Prabhanjana had witnessed these happenings from close quarters, and he gave me a detailed description of all that occurred. He raced his horse ahead of the others because he wanted to give the news to me first. "Maharani," he said, "so long as there is the Raja of Anga, the Kaurava head will hold high. Please prepare to welcome the new Maharani. Light the *dipas* to offer the five-fold *arati* to the Raja of Anga."

6

Word soon spread in the city that the invitees to the *svayamvara* had returned to Hastinapura with Bhanumati and were near the bank of the Ganga. Swift preparations were made to welcome them. Citizens lined the main thoroughfare with garlands in their hands, eager for a darshan of the new Maharani. Princess Bhanumati was now Maharani Bhanumati, Empress of an incomparably wealthy kingdom.

Seated in the howdah of an exquisitely-bedecked royal elephant, Maharaja Duryodhana halted in front of the palace. On his right was the Raja of Anga, on his left Maharani Bhanumati. On his left was another lady—probably a dear friend of Maharani Bhanumati, or why should she be seated so prominently? She was even lovelier than Bhanumati.

The Queen Mother Gandhari Devi offered the *arati* welcome to the bride and groom at the entrance of the resplendent palace—and to the Raja of Anga and the lady who flanked the bride. How difficult it must have been for the blindfolded Queen Mother to offer *arati*! The bride and groom paid their respects to Grandsire Bhishma, Vidura, Uncle Shakuni and other elders before setting foot in the palace. The dear friend of the Maharani also stepped inside. I noticed only one flesh-ear-ring in the Raja of Anga's ears, because he had averted his face and was looking at the lady-friend of Bhanumati. It was not possible for me to see the other flesh-ear-ring.

7

The arrival of the new Maharani was like the advent of spring in the palace. Both of us were happy in the thought that Maharaja Duryodhana's life would burst into flower and fruit in the garden

of marriage. It can happen that an unmarried man behaves erratically out of sheer frustration, but this is not the case with a married man. Finally there was someone who could put a stop to the reckless and harsh doings of Duryodhana, of which we had been hearing often enough. If a wife so wishes, she can divert the destructive rage of her husband into calm dutifulness. I wanted to pass on this art tactfully to Maharani Bhanumati—without offending her in any way. The life of a high-achieving husband is very much in the hands of his wife. She can guide him in troubled times—sometimes with the help of her love, sometimes with the help of her beauty. That was why I wanted very much to get to know the Maharani better. I decided to meet her after the marriage excitement subsided.

But before I could get a chance of meeting her, I received a summon from Maharaja Duryodhana. It was unexpected, but I wasn't surprised. He had very likely called me in order to recount before me some of the exploits of my husband. I was a wife, after all, and what wife is there who does not wish to hear the feats of her husband praised by none less than the illustrious Maharaja himself?

I had decided to wear the blue silk sari presented to me by the Queen Mother Kunti Devi and to take my maid Mrinal with me but... it occurred to me that it was not possible for me, in my pregnant state, to go and meet alone a male other than my husband. So I sent a message through Mrinal saying I was not feeling well and, if the Maharaja would not mind, could he please meet me at his convenience. He was a haughty man, and I knew he might not like this suggestion. He was the Crown Prince of the Kauravas—the would be Emperor of Hastinapura, after all.

And yet, there he was—striding towards my palace, with Mrinal in tow. I saw him clearly from the window, so I hurried inside, and waited in one of the innermost rooms. On the assumption that he would be furious, I was trying to gather courage to face him. No matter what he said, I would not reply back, because he was my husband's fast friend, and he occupied the same place in my life that my brother-in-law Shon did. Besides, my husband had made it very clear that Maharaja Duryodhana was always to be accorded the deepest regard and reverence.

He sat down. Before he could even order her, Mrinal left the room. I jingled my gold bracelets to hint in which part of the room

I was. A thin curtain screened him from me. He looked in the direction of the curtain and said, "Rani of Anga, you must be surprised seeing me here."

"No. But I am sorry I had to send you word to come here, but...I had no choice...."

"I know. Your maid told me. That is why I came here. Don't be surprised I have come."

"I won't. You are the Raja of the Kauravas to all others, but to me you are as close as my brother-in-law Shon-ji."

"I know that—and that is why I had no hesitation in coming here. Besides, the reason I am here is that the work I have cannot be entrusted to anyone else."

"What great task is it that you wish to entrust to an ordinary woman like me?"

"You are not an ordinary woman. The wife of Karna can never be ordinary."

"Your praise is excessive."

"No. It is not excessive, it is the truth. And today the time has come for you to show once again that you are no ordinary person."

"What extraordinary thing do you wish me to do today?"

"You know that the Raja of Anga and I both went to the *svayamvara* of the Kalingas. I have returned with Princess Bhanumati...but before she placed the marriage-garland round my neck, she made a very strange condition."

"She did?"

"I accepted that condition only because I had faith in you."

"In me? If I can make the bud of happiness blossom in your marriage, I am prepared to do all in my power to see it happen, because you are my husband's closest friend. What was the condition?"

"It is her desire that..."

"Don't hesitate, Raja of the Kauravas. Tell me the condition."

"... that the Raja of Anga should marry the lady she treats as her *sakhi*."

I was stunned. But only for a second. I collected myself and asked, "Was the Raja of Anga agreeable?"

"Karna will do anything for Duryodhana's sake—have you ever doubted that? The question is whether you are agreeable—only you."

"Do I understand that the Raja of Anga sent you here to obtain my consent?"

"*Chhee!* He knows nothing at all about this Am I to take it then that you are not agreeable?"

"Why?"

"Because you have so many questions "

"No, that's not it But don't you think that if the same dilemma had cropped up in Bhanumati's life, she would have asked many more questions?"

"No, she would not have asked a single question She would have turned the person out of doors with a single word You are not Bhanumati, which is why I have dared to come to you "

"I will do all in my power to make you and the Raja of Anga happy If your marriage depends on my agreement, then I am agreeable "

He rose happily from his seat Unable to check his feelings, he said, "*Bhabhi*, now I realise why Karna was prepared to sacrifice so much in order to make you his wife "

He adjusted his shawl and strode towards the door in order to leave

"What is the name of this fortunate lady?" I finally asked

"Supriya "

He left quickly My pretence of enthusiastic assent collapsed A co-wife! *Chhee!* Wasn't this a black spot on the happy cheek of my marriage? He had said her name was Supriya, "the Supremely Pleasing One", but would she really be all that pleasing to everyone as time passed? My mind was bewildered by all kinds of doubts There are times when a man has no choice except to gamble with fate

As Prabhanjana suggested, I made plans to welcome the new Maharani But a very different Maharani! Till now I had rights over both flesh-ear-rings Now Supriya had a right to one What I had obtained with great difficulty, fell all so easily in her lap That's why they say that some are born lucky

8

The Raja of Anga's wedding with Supriya was celebrated with tremendous pomp What Duryodhana had predicted came true—the Raja of Anga could not turn down his request Truth can indeed be more weird than imagination But it has to be accepted because it is truth, after all I resolved never to hurt Supriya To

hurt her would be to make my husband unhappy A woman always chooses the way of least harm and the path of most good That's her inborn trait

Supriya was provided a mansion of her own In spite of all that had taken place, my love for my husband continued as before And his love for me could not ever be even an iota less How could he ever forget the incident of the drenched shawl beside the bank of the Ganga? But Supriya had gone two steps ahead of me She had rudely jolted all my dreams She was tactful enough to come and see me first thing after her marriage She greeted me respectfully and said, "*Didi*, I am your younger sister You have given me my life, as it were If you had not agreed, I would have died with the name of the Raja of Anga on my lips There is no end to my love for him I had taken a firm decision to obtain the flesh-earrings of Hastinapura at any cost "

"Supriye! It is wonderful that you have come It was becoming difficult for me to look after such an illustrious husband single-handed Just keep in mind one thing—on no account should he ever be hurt Remember, the sorrows of big men are big sorrows It is not enough for a wife to tackle them with just love and determination, a lot of patience and discipline is also required "

The visit of Supriya healed my doubt-disturbed mind She had the eyes of a deer, and she was as guileless and gentle She lived up to her sweet name

9

I had an excellent excuse to converse with my husband after he married Supriya

"It isn't always women who are selfish Men are not any better " Whenever I said this, he would ask in surprise, "What's at the back of your mind?"

"I'm forced to say what I have to say You've gone and married twice But has it ever occurred to you that your brother has come of age? What else do you expect me to say? "

"Vrishali, I think I'll have to get Shon married soon just for the sake of your peace of mind, otherwise "

"Otherwise what?"

"Otherwise just for the sake of retaliation, you will take the offensive and marry him to three brides simultaneously, and so

become free of all responsibilities And you'll probably marry him to the first three girls you lay your eyes on "

"Retaliation? Against you? Isn't taking my own back against you just a way of hurting myself?"

That made him silent But he did realise that unless he arranged to get his brother married soon, I would find some pretext or other of teasing him

10

After the marriage of Maharaja Duryodhana, here, there, and everywhere was one topic of discussion only—that he would soon be installed as the Maharaja of Hastinapura It was also rumoured that he would honour the Raja of Anga by appointing him Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces Maharaja Dhritarashtra had become very old It was a considerable achievement that he had governed the kingdom of the Kauravas so well all these years, still the elder citizens reminisced about Maharaja Pandu, "Maharaja Pandu was responsible for disseminating the fame of the kingdom by his world-conquest His lotus handsome five sons perished with their mother Kunti in the forest fire Some believe they are still alive If so, they should be brought back to Hastinapura "

These views of the citizens were brought to my ears sometimes by Shon ji, and at other times by my brother Satyasena, or by Prabhanjana or Mrinal There were many Hastinapurans who remembered and cherished the Pandavas with love and respect When the subject cropped up, I also similarly recalled the Queen Mother Kunti Devi—and with her came the remembrance of the five sons who accompanied her I never could accept the fact that they were no more in this world In the whirligig of Time, what was true yesterday becomes untrue today—and that is exactly what happened The Pandavas who had lain low for two or three years suddenly surfaced at Draupadi's *svayamvara*

After the *svayamvara*, they immediately sped to Mathura Sri Krishna was their maternal cousin The citizens all surmised that they would continue to dwell in Mathura, because they knew very well that Maharaja Duryodhana and the Pandavas were at loggerheads But I did want very much to see all the five brothers together at least once in Hastinapura Among them, Prince

Nakula seemed to me to be the exact likeness of my husband—with out the golden curly locks, of course, and without the flesh ear-rings and skin-armour I yearned to see the five at least once The passage of Time had mitigated my grief for my son's death

One day that longing was fulfilled The Raja of Anga and I were discussing the merits and demerits of the beautiful ladies of various kingdoms

"Vrishali, have you heard anything about the kingdom of Kulinda?"

"Not much "

"It nestles in the foothills of the Himalayas A veritable heaven of lush perennial greenery The ladies there are truly *apsaras* of heaven I'll search for a bride there for Shon "

He had unbounded love for his brother I was about to say something, when Maharaja Duryodhana's special emissary Prabhanjana entered and hurriedly said, "Maharaja, an emerg-ency meeting of the royal council has been called I have been instructed to accompany you to the meeting "

"Why? What is wrong?" My husband rose from his seat

"The Pandavas from Mathura have arrived at the outskirts of Hastinapura The news is that they are camped on the other side of the Ganga They have come to claim half their rightful share of the kingdom from Maharaja Duryodhana—that's what the rumours say "

"You go ahead, Prabhanjana We will follow Inform them that I will be there soon in my council robes "

He went to the dressing room to change A lizard of doubt scuttled in my mind What if a quarrel brewed up in the royal council? The problem was the division of the kingdom Lakhs of heroes get beheaded over kingdom disputes Waves of poisonous inhumanities—what should never be, is inexorably pursued In the eyes of the world, wealth, kingdom, fame and the like might be very desirable indeed, but for a wife nothing is more precious than her husband Her husband is her throne

The instant he returned after changing, I approached him My mind insisted that I tell him something

"Vrishali, I am going to the royal council " He smiled as he said this, placing the golden crown on his head

'Wait, I have never asked anything from you till today But today I feel that I must "

"This is hardly the time to ask. I am a warrior of the Kauravas. You are the wife of a warrior."

"No, this is the perfect time "

"Vrishali, there is no power that can stop me now from going to the royal council Not even you."

"I am not stopping you from going. You must go to the council, but on one condition "

"What?"

"You must not interfere if they decide to divide the kingdom That is all I ask "

"How is that possible? Karna has dedicated himself to resolve Duryodhana's problems Don't you know who is responsible for making you the all-powerful queen of the kingdom of Anga, ruling in this palace of the solar dynasty?"

"I know that only too well But—but the Pandavas are Pandu's sons, after all That is what my mind keeps dinning into me If you look at the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, you will feel like me too "

Mention of the Queen Mother's name made him suddenly and unexpectedly serious He adjusted his slipping shawl on his shoulder, and stood still for a while

I broke the silence with "Don't take sides in the division of the kingdom between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, because that can easily lead to lasting enmity "

He cupped my face in his warm palms and, looking into my eyes as he used to, he said, "Vrishali, when you were discussing a little while ago the matter of Shon's marriage, you behaved exactly like his elder sister And now, talking about me, I had a fleeting impression that you were speaking like a mother of two—mother of the son of Karna you are carrying and mother of Karna himself A woman can play many roles simultaneously with a man You've proved that today The beloved who lavishly bestows love and the mother who is always alert about her son's welfare—both can sometimes exist in the same body and at the same time Radhamata would have said exactly what you are saying, if she were here "

"Go then—but to listen, not to speak "

"Very well I give you my word, I won't say a word " He made the promise impulsively

He left I felt relieved The beat of drums heralded the arrival of the Pandavas I stood near the window, eager to get a glimpse of the Queen Mother Kunti

Half an hour later, the Pandavas, Kunti Devi and Draupadi came to the front of the palace, along with a host of followers. With them was Acharya Vidura. Not even a ramshackle chariot had been sent to bring them. I was pained by this. From the window I could see all that was happening in front of the palace entrance. Grandsire Bhishma and Acharya Vidura embraced the Pandavas warmly. But there wasn't the same cordiality in the embrace of Maharaja Dhritarashtra. Maharaja Duryodhana kept staring at Bhima, whose head was bowed because he was carrying an elderly lady on his back. Prince Arjuna was staring at the flesh-ear-rings, and Yudhishthira at the feet of the Raja of Anga. The Queen Mother and the Raja of Anga were gazing at each other with an enigmatic intensity. Could it be that the Raja of Anga was trying to find out from her eyes whether the Pandavas were really the sons of Maharaja Pandu, and the Queen Mother was replying with her eyes, "Karna, Raja of Anga, convince your Duryodhana that we are the rightful heirs of the kingdom."

At first sight I could not make out who Prince Bhima was carrying. Who was that lady? I tried and tried, but no answer was forthcoming. Finally, I despatched Mrinal to find out. She pushed her way through the crowd, made enquiries, and returned to pant with breathless haste, "Maharani, she's a maid."

"Maid! On Prince Bhima's back?"

"Yes. She is the Queen Mother Kunti Devi's maid. Some Dhatri or Dharitri."

"What was that?"

"Dhatri."

I didn't like the name; perhaps the "dh" and the "tr" sounds didn't appeal to me; perhaps there was some other reason, I don't know.

I looked down. The Queen Mother and Draupadi left the palace with Acharya Vidura, because the Acharya had renounced all familial connections and did not reside in the palace. Kunti Devi was going to stay in his thatched-leaf hut. The others prepared to go to the council chamber for the royal meeting. The Raja of Anga instructed Prabhanjana, who was standing next to him, to help the elderly woman down from Bhima's back. All climbed the royal steps, Uncle Shakuni being the last. He whispered something in Maharaja Duryodhana's ear, so softly that none could hear.

I could see only the back of Prince Arjuna, and I couldn't believe that this was the man who had killed my son. How graciously he ascended the steps!

Who can say if warriors have any idea of who they are killing in the thick of battle? How composed and gentle they look ordinarily, but how merciless they become in the heat of war!

11

I got to know the ins and outs of the royal meeting, and they didn't appeal to me at all. Wealth and power can transform men into worse than beasts. How could anyone condone the behaviour of Uncle Shakuni towards Yudhishthira who wanted his share of the kingdom? I was disgusted by it. But it is not always possible to avoid unpleasant things. I did not like the idea of Uncle Shakuni leaving his kingdom and living in Hastinapura. He was at the root of all this bad blood.

In the meeting Prince Yudhishthira spoke on behalf of the Pandavas, "We are the sons of Maharaja Pandu." That was the basis of his claim. "The just share of the kingdoms won by our world conquering father should be rightfully made over to us." In spite of the fact there were elderly and experienced Kaurava heroes in the chamber, Uncle Shakuni interrupted him and retorted cunningly, "If the Pandavas are so eager to get a share of the kingdom, the Kauravas are gladly prepared to grant them the vast Khandava forest. The Pandavas were born on the Shatashringa hill. It suits them to stay in forests and near hills."

These words of Uncle Shakuni reeked of rank injustice, hypocrisy and cruel untruth, but all the heroes in the sabha preferred to remain helplessly silent. It was a great mistake on my part today to force the Raja of Anga to give me his word. He knew that the Pandavas were being treated with rank injustice, and he was terribly troubled by it. But his promise compelled him to remain silent.

Yudhishthira accepted the Khandava forest. The meeting gave over.

On returning from the sabha the Raja of Anga said, "Vrishali, Uncle Shakuni could have had only one intention in allotting the Khandava wilderness to the Pandavas—to make them prey of wild

beasts! What happened in the sabha today was against all principles of nobility Why did you make me give you my word today of all days?"

12

After a two-day stay in Acharya Vidura's thatched-leaf hut, the Pandavas made preparations to leave for Khandava I desperately wanted to meet the Queen Mother Kunti during their brief residence I will never be able to explain why I was so attracted to the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, but there was no doubt that I was irresistibly drawn towards her Many individuals come into our lives, but it does not follow that we develop any special relationship with them, but it does happen that a certain individual, even on the very first meeting, exerts a unique attraction which cannot be denied Such was the case of my fascination for the Queen Mother She had returned after such a long time—and that intensified my desire to meet her and talk to her And the Queen Mother Kunti Devi herself provided an excellent opportunity to do so She despatched a messenger from her hut to summon me—which was just what I wanted I knew from the very beginning that she loved me greatly I didn't waste a second, I called my brother Satyasena He prepared the chariot and drove me to Acharya Vidura's hut

In front of the hut Acharya Vidura and the Queen Mother were busy discussing something Seeing me, she came forward The Pandavas were very likely visiting the city As soon as I alighted from the chariot, I touched her feet and respectfully greeted her She raised me up by my shoulders and said, "Daughter-in law, you are carrying I did not know this, or I would have come to you myself" Each word of hers came to me filled with the love I associated with my own mother What a terrible punishment fate had meted to this gentle and truthful lady! Yet, being the aristocratic lady that she was, she remained large-hearted A Maharani had deigned to enquire after the welfare of a charioteer's daughter who was the wife of a charioteer-king!

I talked freely with the Queen Mother While I talked, she kept advising me lovingly how a pregnant woman should look after herself As I was about to leave, she said, "The son you will have will be extraordinary What have you planned to name him?"

"If he is born with flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, Kavacha-dhara or Kundala-sena,' I replied

She thought a little and replied, "No, *bahu* He will have neither flesh-ear-rings nor skin-armour, neither *kundala* nor *kavacha* Of course he will be as handsome as his father Let him be as fortunate as you—name him after yourself—call him Vrisha-sena "

"If that is your wish, I will certainly name him Vrisha-sena "

I took leave of her and climbed into my chariot I couldn't make sense of her words—"He will have neither flesh-ear-rings nor skin-armour " Why did she tell me that? I had no clue at all

13

The Pandavas left with their mother for Khandava They decided to dwell there in a thatched-leaf hut The idea that the five sons of an illustrious monarch should have to live in a dense wilderness rankled in my mind But I was only a woman What can a woman do except silently observe what goes on? The only power in her hands is to look after her family

I broached the subject of Shon-ji's marriage before my husband in all kinds of ways One day, on the auspicious full-moon Purnima, he did finally leave with his army for Kulinda in search of a bride, taking Shon-ji with him I could now feel relaxed at least I had no doubt at all that he would be successful in any direction he chose to travel

He was back after a month, with him was a lovely young girl of Kulinda I offered *arati* before her as soon as she reached the palace she was going to be the wife of my only brother-in-law Her complexion dazzled like lightning flashing in the sky, her eyes were large, nose sharp, face rounded like the Raja of Anga's Her name was Meghamala, "Cloud-Garland"

Shon-ji and Meghamala were married in a splendid pavilion erected in front of the palace Their union brought me an inexpressible happiness, because I was freed now of one great responsibility When Shon-ji came to me after the wedding accompanied by his bride, I said, "Young brother-in-law, a

garland of clouds has been placed round your neck today Take good care of it May your married life be radiant with all the colours of Indra's rainbow "

He smiled knowingly and replied, "I will marry twice too, as Bhaiya has I hope you know what I mean, *Bhabhi ji* But there's a world of difference between Bhaiya and me "

14

I, Supriya and Meghamala were absorbed in looking after our parents-in-law They would look at the three of us and say joyfully, "Daughters, now it is proper that Bhagavan call us back to Him That is all we desire How wonderful it would be if after such incomparable happiness we went straight to heaven Karna is the Raja of Anga, he has two wives, Shon is also happily married What greater happiness can charioteers like us dream of?"

Pinching me, Supriya would tell them, "But, Pita-ji, we have heard that heaven is not for those who haven't seen the face of a grandson "

"That is true, Supriya That wish remains to be fulfilled Vrishali will soon see to that Isn't that so, Vrishali?" Blushing with embarrassment, I glanced in mock anger at Supriya, while she, averting her gaze, burst into giggles After Sudamana, there had been no child's laughter in the palace for many years

15

Day after day passed, and I was now having difficulty moving about When I lay down on my bed, my entire life would flash across my eyes My father had died when I was still a little girl, and I had been lovingly brought up by my mother and elder brother Satyasena The day I arrived in Hastinapura was also the day my mother departed from this world I met the Raja of Anga for the first time in Prayaga A horse and a pot were responsible for this meeting I have always been silently grateful to that horse for providing me with my companion for all my lives Illustrious, handsome, humble, and affectionate Living with him was like experiencing a springtime of joy Motherhood is the sacred fulfilment of a woman's life, it is the supreme gift of nature The birth of glory is in man's hands, but the glory of birth is known only to a

woman Motherhood is a woman's finest and loveliest dedication, her sadhana Everything else is pursuit of selfish pleasure, but motherhood's joy, because it is the incomparable ecstasy of creation, is like the bliss of Brahman But this bliss is not an easy achievement, because a woman has to endure birth-pains similar to death in order to experience it The gold of motherhood emerges only after refinement in the furnace of birth-pangs That is why it makes a woman so intensely aware of her selfhood

One day I found myself in labour, a thousand arrows of pain mercilessly racked my body I endured the agony with fortitude I had to—for the sake of my to-be-born son Life! How painfully it gets born—this life so precious and so desirable! The first cry of life is the baby drawing its breath from the energy of the mother's birth-pangs Motherhood is a miracle—as ecstatic as it is agonising, as hopeful as it is fearful

I gave birth to a baby son pink as the fruit of the wild fig-tree My body felt light and suffused with love I felt exhausted, all my energy had drained out of me But I raised myself with great difficulty, out of curiosity, I took my baby son from the midwife and hugged him He was the exact image of his father, but—but without the flesh-ear-rings There was no way of knowing whether his skin was impenetrable or not I was surprised, I was hurt The Queen Mother's prediction had come true

Hearing the wail of the baby, my husband, Shon-ji, Supriya, Meghamala, and my brother Satyasena entered the room My husband swiftly took the baby in his arms, and looked at his ears with a restless intensity He felt the ears repeatedly for any sign of flesh-ear-rings He gently pricked a needle in the baby's soft small finger A drop of blood appeared Seeing it, he became very pensive His tall frame trembled He returned the baby to the midwife and, approaching Shon-ji, shook his shoulders and said, "Shon, you are my own brother, but you don't have flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour This is my son, and he doesn't have flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour Why? Who am I? *Arre*, why don't you tell me who I am?"

He continued, "I was hurt also when Sudamana was born, but I consoled myself saying, 'My next son will have flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour ' Today my hopes have been shattered No son of mine is going to be born with flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour "

Shon-ji kept silent and still The Raja of Anga turned to his mother and asked worriedly, "Mother, why is it that even this grandson of yours doesn't have flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour?" She did not reply Finally he turned to me excitedly and, forgetting that I was in a state of exhaustion, he shook my arm and said, "Vrishali, you tell me who am I? Won't anyone tell me who I am?"

"Why are you so agitated? You are the son of Radha-mata, you are Shon-ji's elder brother, you are the father of this baby son, you are the Raja of Anga," I replied softly to him

"No, Vrishali, that's not it I don't know who I am, and no one tells me either " He strode out hurriedly

16

The name-giving ritual of my son elicited all kinds of attractive nomenclature—but I chose to call him Vrishasena The coming of Vrishasena gave me a wonderful chance to entertain myself He kicked his legs and arms so furiously that sometimes I really got worried A home and children—these constitute a woman's life She finds her joy in them My first son Sudamana had lost his life for no reason in the *svayamvara* of Draupadi His memory sometimes tugged at my heart, but I had to forget him Supriya and Meghamala would not allow Vrishasena to leave their laps even for a second. They smothered him with kisses, burbling, "Vrishu! Vrishu!" I felt then as if someone was caressing all my limbs with hundreds of joyful peacock plumes I felt as if Sudamana had taken a second birth from me

Like the moon slowly, little by little, waxing in light during the bright half of the lunar month, my baby son waxed in the love and affection of everyone His pretty looks delighted all I couldn't help thinking how wonderful it would have been had he been born with flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour

Maharani Bhanumati and Princess Duhshala came to see Vrishasena I was meeting the Maharani for the first time I had thought she would be gentle and modest, but she turned out to be the very epitome of self-esteem Seeing me, she could think of nothing else to say except, "I am sure you don't like my coming here "

"Why?" I asked

"Because I'm the one who brought you your co-wife, that's why "

"*Chhee*! I never saw it like that On the contrary, Supriya has increased my happiness "

"That may be so now, but when she has her own children, the sweetness between the two of you will not remain the same "

"We are both wives of the Raja of Anga More important than our happiness are the wishes of the Raja of Anga "

"Vrishali, Queen of Anga, the future is least concerned about the wishes of the Raja of Anga, in fact, it's least concerned even about God's own wishes," she said

She talked so irritably it seemed she had come expressly to pick a quarrel with me. I kept silent The purpose she had come for was forgotten She did not even look at Vrishasena Princess Duhshala did take him in her arms and feel his ears again and again She kissed his curly hair repeatedly

17

I was truly on the peak of happiness, but the memory of the Queen Mother Kunti Devi sometimes disturbed me So I asked my brother Satyasena to let me have whatever news about her that came his way His reports made me marvel at the exploits of the Pandavas

In less than six months those magnificent heroes had cut out a clearing in the dense jungle They had toppled massive sky-kissing trees Mace-wielding Bhima strode out at crack of dawn with a sharp axe on his shoulder, and returned only after he had levelled all the trees and thorny shrubs within the radius of one *yojana* Leaving one brother behind to protect their mother and Draupadi, the other four left early in the morning in the four directions and started working Land which for thousands of years had not known a glimpse of sunlight now became hallowed with the rays of the sun as a result of their unremitting labours The wilderness of Khandava was transformed into a level territory

Within one year the levelling was complete After that, with the help of artisans despatched by Sri Krishna from Mathura, they began constructing a magnificent palace making use of the forest's enormous wealth of timber Bhima brought massive blocks of stone on his shoulders The five proud and determined princes had

vowed that they would never depend on alms from anyone The skilful artisans of Mathura worked steadily to ensure that the palace raised its head every day a little closer to the distant skies Nakula tamed the wild horses of the forest, trapping hundreds of them within a wooden enclosure The consistent progress made by the Pandavas never reached the ears of anyone in Hastinapura On my asking, my brother would occasionally visit Khandava and bring me the latest news I had cautioned him that on no account was any word of this to reach the ears of Maharaja Duryodhana His envy might even stretch out as far as Khandava—that was my constant fear

It seemed to me that the Pandavas were perfectly happy basking in the blessings of the Queen Mother Kunti Devi

18

Day and night delightedly pursued each other, like a pair of *chataka*-birds I never realised that Vrishasena was already two years old There wasn't room enough in the palace for his gambolling "Father! Father!" he shouted and climbed into my husband's lap My husband quickly lifted him up and smelt his head affectionately for a long time Vrishasena installed himself cosily on his strong arm and gazed with big, round eyes at the gently quivering flesh-ear-rings Suddenly he reached out, felt them with both hands, and lisped, "Ta! Ta! Ta!"

My husband looked at me and told him, "Vrishu, you love these ear-rings? But you can't have them Little one, faraway things always look pretty How can I tell you what mental pain I've suffered on their account!"

As if he understood perfectly what had been said, Vrishasena let go of the flesh-ear-rings immediately and stretched his hands towards me Taking him in my arms, I said, "He's not two years old yet, but he understands every word you say Wait till he grows up—he'll never listen to me "

"How can that be, Vrishali? He is the son of Karna He can never forget his mother," my husband confidently assured me

19

Vrishasena, by his coming, had decided to transform the palace into his own laughing domain After his auspicious birth, the

palace was blessed with a whole gaggle of giggling children He wasn't yet two when a son named Lakshmana was born to Maharani Bhanumati His name-giving ritual was performed with the most unimaginable pomp ever Which was natural, because he was the future Maharaja of the Kauravas, the grandson of Maharaja Dhritarashtra

A month after the birth of Lakshmana, Supriya had a son, as pretty as a painting, for which reason he was named Chitrasena Just after his birth, becoming even more anxious than my husband, I hurried to see the baby I gazed curiously at the new-born child lying on her bed, but he did not have flesh-ear-rings either It was quite obvious now that none of the Maharaja's children would be blessed with the divine gift of flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour This realisation made him sombre No one really knew what was actually disturbing him Sometimes he would stand for hours on end in the Ganga offering *arghya* to the Sun, forgetting even his meals I worried about him

My husband was wealthy, talented, handsome—a unique combination, enough to make any woman dedicate her life totally in his service But no one could penetrate the recesses of his mind I spent night and day with him, but sometimes I got the feeling that I was not living in the shadow of a human being but rather within the nimbus of a divine dazzle, and that was the reason I was often tongue-tied in front of him Once Princess Duhshala Devi had asked me a question, which I had not disclosed to my husband He teased me no end to worm the secret out of me, but I remained adamant

It was an embarrassing question "When you two are alone together, doesn't his impenetrable skin armour create problems for you?" Tell me, how could I possibly repeat this question of Duhshala Devi's to my husband?

20

One day I got the surprise news that the Pandavas had constructed a township in the wilderness of Khandava The news pleased many people The township was called Indraprastha, and the Pandavas had proclaimed it the capital of Khandava Many admirers of the Pandavas had already started emigrating with their families from Hastinapura to Indraprastha Every day the

lowland choked with all manner of weeds and grasses Mists of suspicion and distrust gleam on it all the time But no one tried to patch the rift Days rose, robed in dawnlight, and nights departed, dressed in darkness Two kingdoms, whose borders are the same, can never be happy with the embers of hate smouldering in their hearts This simple truth did not strike even the grey eminences

My personal life was happy, but I did not feel at peace in the surrounding atmosphere of discord

21

Happy days are the most fleeting—or, let us say, when the mind is steeped in joy, it loses sense of time Vrishasena, Lakshmana, and Chitrasena grew up together Children, no matter how much they grow up, remain children to their parents Vrishasena was now six, a boisterous, babbling bundle His unending questions and doubts exasperated everyone in the palace The only one he feared even slightly was my husband The royal sabha, the royal academy, and hunting occupied much of my husband's time—and whatever was left over he spent with Vrishasena Talking to the child, he became a child too Often Vrishasena came up with the most far-out questions

One day he said, "Father, you are really selfish "

"How's that, Vrishu? All of Hastinapura says I am generous," my husband laughed, caressing his head

'No, you are selfish Or you would have got me the same beautiful flesh-ear-rings which you have "

"Little one, if such ear-rings were easy to get, then won't everyone get them? If I could cut them off, I'd give them to you this instant because you like them so much I don't much care for them any more "

' How can you cut them by yourself? Only someone else can do it How will you hold both ears and your sword at the same time?"

"Well, try cutting them yourself, in that case "

"I will—but what if it bleeds? Mother will beat me, no?"

"No, little one Remove the ear-rings before she arrives They won't bleed Even if they do, I won't cry And I won't tell on you "

Determined like his father, he immediately went to the arms-room, and returned brandishing a small sword He sat in my husband's lap and gripped one ear-ring tight in his chubby hands

Then, pausing, he said, "Father, I'm not selfish like you I'll take just one ear-ring One And I'll let you keep one " Saying this, he raised his sword

"Very well You take your share Hurry " My husband ordered him, and looked at him with large curious eyes to see what he would do next

By this time I had arrived

Clenching his lips with his tiny teeth, he began slicing my husband's ears with the sharp sword But the sword had the same effect as a harmless grassblade He tried hard and long We watched, laughing at his endeavours Finally, exhausted, beads of sweat gleamed on his forehead and he wasn't even able to lift the sword any more He flung it aside, and climbed out of his father's lap

My husband asked, "Vrishu, little one, what happened?"

His reply was so unexpected that I realised for the first time what a knowing little boy he was Without acknowledging his defeat in any way, he said with a natural childlike charm, "Nothing happened, father I don't want your ear-rings "

"Why, little one?"

"What will I do with them? You have such huge ears, and I have such tiny ones Won't they look silly on me?"

Delighted with the explanation, my husband pulled him towards himself and, kissing the ringless little ears again and again, said, "It's good you don't have ear-rings What good my ear-rings are going to do to me, I don't myself know, little one "

Our days, happy with Vrishasena's playful pranks, passed like birds scattering at the shot of a catapult Only the memories of some incidents lingered, like blurred twilight after sunset

22

Ashvatthaman, son of Guru Drona, sometimes came to the palace with the Raja of Anga to relish a bowl of milk He and Vrishasena got on splendidly together The Guru's son who never admitted defeat before anyone would lay down arms in front of my son

One day he was in the palace I sent Mrinal with a *thali* of fruits into the room The Guru's son picked out a fig from the heap, peeled it carefully and kept gazing at it with the utmost seriousness. My husband said, "What's the matter, Ashvatthaman?"

"Raja of Anga, there's a worm in this fig, and yet the fig is so lovely on the outside. Isn't human life the same? Lovely outside, rotten inside."

"Ashvatthaman, why blame the fig for that?"

"We won't discuss whose fault it is. But it's true that life is not what it appears to be. Look at this fruit. It's so positively attractive-looking."

My husband did not reply, but I noticed Vrishasena, who had been listening to them, slowly rise from his seat. He walked to the front door of the palace and straight through to the main entrance till he was out of doors. Where could he be going? I was on the point of instructing Mrinal to look for him when he returned, leaping like a veritable rabbit. He stood firmly in front of his father and the Guru's son and, opening his clenched fist, asked, "*Chacha-ji*, tell me, is there a worm in this too?" I saw a piece of stone in his palm.

That strange question put the Guru's son again in a deeply reflective mood. Glancing at my husband, he said, "Raja of Anga, how simply and perfectly has your son provided the answer to my last question!" He took the stone from Vrishasena's open palm, looked at it intently, and said, "Where's the worm in this lifeless stone! A worm can breed only in fruit. The fault—the fault lies in a living being. The worm feeds on the life-sap of a fruit. It grows. But the fruit is unable to eject it. A man's faults are like that. They feed and grow on the sap of his folly."

He thumped Vrishasena's back approvingly and said, "Vrishasena, throw the stone out of the window and place the fig in your mouth." He placed the stone in my son's left hand, selected a fig from the *thali*, and placed it in his right. Vrishasena flung the stone down from the window. While munching the fig, Vrishasena had another surprise for the Guru's son. Gazing at the cloth tied round his head, my son said, "*Chacha-ji*, I also will tie cloth round my head as you do."

"Why, little one? You are the son of the Raja of Anga. You should be wearing a golden crown, not a piece of cloth."

"No. What use is a golden crown? I can't make a flag out of it."

"Flag? Do you mean to wear a cloth like this for the sake of making a flag?"

"Yes. Big people tell me flags fall off masts in a war. So this is the best way of having another flag ready when that happens."

His reply made us laugh But *why* we were laughing—how was that innocent boy to know that?

23

When Vrishasena became seven, another son was born to me And to Supriya also My son was named Sushena, and hers Susharma Our parents-in-law glowed with joy All the extreme difficulties they had faced in their lives were now rewarded The small family plant they had watered had burgeoned into a massive banyan They always said to me, "Vrishali, you are the goddess of prosperity, the Lakshmi of this house You came with an overflowing treasury of happiness What we could not even dream of, is happening in front of our eyes "

I would press their feet and reply, "Nothing happened because of my coming The pains you took for the sake of my husband have borne fruit at last "

"We took no pains really over him It was our good fortune that he chose to be born in our thatched-leaf hut It is our good fortune that you came to him as his wife These are all the fruits of our previous lives, *beti* "

Sushena gurgled in the lap of his grandmother as if trying to remind all of us that he too was a fruit of the virtues of our past lives She patted and hummed him to sleep I begged of her to hum the lullaby louder, and her reply was, "When Vasu was just his age, I used to sing this for him I don't even remember the words clearly now And really, how can I sing the lullaby of the thatched Champanagari hut in this luxurious palace? Why don't you sing him something that befits this palace?" Placing the sleeping Sushena in my lap, she said all this

How many countless hills of hardship had this mother not endured for her son! Thinking this, I realised how insignificant I was, compared to her

24

A year after Sushena's birth, I had another son, Vrishaketa And so I was mother now of three boys My life's garden blossomed with these three arrivals Vrishasena, Sushena, and Vrishaketa Three lovely golden lotuses in a garden To keep up

with me, I suppose, Supriya also gave birth to two more handsome sons Prasena and Bhanusena Chitrasena, Susharma, Prasena, and Bhanusena were Supriya's four sons, each as good-looking as his mother The strange thing was that neither of us had a daughter Again and again I thought—Wouldn't it have been perfect if there had been even one daughter? That lack was filled by Shon-ji At the same time that I had Vrishaketa, he became the father of a daughter with lovely long fish-eyes—so she was unanimously named Minakshi Like Meghamala, she was a lovable girl, as fair skinned as a *ketaki* flower She was never known to cry My husband loved her even more than he loved his sons

He picked her up in his strong arms and said to me once, "Vrishali, you think no end of your beauty, don't you? When Minakshi grows up, Duryodhana's son Lakshmana will want to marry her You are the Queen of Anga, she will be the Queen of the Kauravas "

"Anything but that, please," I replied

"Why?"

"If she becomes the Queen of the Kauravas, won't you have to sing her praises?"

"So why don't you say that you don't want your husband to bow his head before anyone, certainly not before his relatives "

He never argued with anyone else, but he loved teasing the life out of me I would concede defeat, and keep silent Isn't there a proverb One silent person defeats a hundred

He'd play for hours with Minakshi Seeing him play in that way, I would take my mind back to the past, trying vainly to discover where and how twenty years had vanished

During that long period of time, was I in Hastinapura or in heaven? The only pain was the occasional memory of Sudamana which burst in like a storm and made me miserable He would have been twentyfive now, had he lived After paying his respects to me, he used to say, while leaving for the gymnasium, "Mother, all the others are terrified by my 'Thorny Arm' holds " But I had nothing of him left except these obscure memories

25

Many new faces had cropped up in the palace Grandsire Bhishma had married the hundred Kaurava princes to as many

princesses from different kingdoms The palace hummed with the new arrivals, like a hive buzzing with honeybees The glory of the Kauravas vied for supremacy with the peaks of the Himalayas This was the first time the palace had the chance of seeing the romantic spectacle of a hundred princely households functioning in harmony all at one time But all this romantic ambience merely served to remind me of the Pandavas The one major difference between the Kauravas and the Pandavas was such that I would not forget it The Kaurava princes each had a wife, but the five Pandavas all had a common wife The Kauravas' sister Duhshala Devi was married to Jayadratha, Raja of the Sindhus

I was puzzled by the behaviour of Grandsire Bhishma He was valiant, elderly, influential, deserving of respect, even of awe, but he was amazingly indifferent to the Pandavas He never once went to meet them while they were transforming the wilderness of Khandava into Indraprastha He never objected to the injustices that were perpetrated on them He never personally came forward to prevent the malicious intentions of Maharaja Duryodhana And he never supported the Queen Mother Kunti Devi in her terrible ordeal I had no idea why all this was going on He preferred to remain an objective spectator

The kingdom of the Pandavas, of which Indraprastha was the capital, flourished Like a seedling pushing through rock, their kingdom rose to become an astonishing sky-high tree, growing taller every day Indraprastha became the centre of wrestlers, warriors, artisans, singers, dancers and farmers from neighbouring territories Hastinapura was the fruit of the past labours of ancestors, Indraprastha was the living example of self and present-day exertions

26

Days, months and years, hand in hand, scampered across the field of Time like children playing games I hadn't the time to keep count, all my time passed in looking after my children and Supriya s So many joys had come rushing to me that I completely forgot I was after all only a charioteer's daughter All the Kaurava warriors of the palace honoured me as the Queen of Anga Yet one thought worried me My elder brother Satyasena was still unmarried Because he was older, I couldn't speak out about this

or argue about it in front of him Nor did I remind my husband about this matter, because I was averse to asking anything for my brother from him Something in my mind, however, told me that the Raja of Anga *would on his own broach this matter with me*

And that is exactly what happened One day, placing sanctified rice in my hand, he said, "Tell me, who is this sanctified rice for? Let's see if you can guess "

I joked, "Two must be inauspicious for you, so you want a third wife, I suppose "

"No I was married the third time a long time ago," he said casually

My heart missed a beat I asked worriedly, "Third marriage? With whom?"

"Look, Vrishali, you are my second wife, Supriya the third "

"So who is the fortunate first?" My heart was thumping loudly

"Bowcraft," he laughed out uproariously He pointed to the sanctified rice grains in my palm and said, "These rice grains are not for me, but for your brother Satyasena Vrishali, you nagged me day in and day out regarding Shon's marriage But you haven't breathed a word about your brother's marriage Why?"

"Because though I am the Queen of Anga, I am also the sister of a self-respecting brother '

He took my hand in his and said, "Vrishali, Supriya is much lovelier than you, but she doesn't know how to say exactly the right thing at the right time Where have you learnt this art?'

' Where did you learn bowcraft?"

"From my guru "

"His name?"

"I can't reveal his name "

"Neither can I reveal my guru's name "

'Look, your perfect answers have again started "

I looked at the grains of rice in my palm and kept silent Each grain seemed to contain an image of Satyasena-*dada*' with his *marriage crown That largehearted brother had accepted* all the hardships of the world for the sake of his younger sister True to his name, he had followed the path of truth

On the day selected by the family priest, my brother's marriage to a charioteer's daughter of Hastinapura was solemnised with great ostentation Because he was Maharaja Duryodhana's charioteer, no expense was spared His wife's name was Pushpavati

Within a month after the marriage, a daughter was born to Maharaja Duryodhana The little princess was welcomed into the world by the citizens of Hastinapura with rows of clay lamps lighting up the city The *purohita* named the pretty baby Sudarshana

In the palace, Prince Lakshmana, Princess Sudarshana, my sons and Supriya's sons, Minakshi and many other little children grew up happily like flowers The palace was too small for their antics Would the gods in heaven start envying Hastinapura? That doubt occasionally crept into my mind

27

Rumours of Indraprastha roused curiosity in the minds of all The Pandavas had established an independent kingdom of which Indraprastha was the capital Neighbouring kingdoms recognised it as the kingdom of Indraprastha Instead of Hastinapura, all honours went to Indraprastha

Kingdoms are not run by liberal citizens and magnificent mansions Wealth is needed for their running Everyone in Hastinapura was eager to discover how and from where the Pandavas had obtained their wealth

Bhima and Arjuna exceeded all limits in their career of overthrowing neighbouring territories The levies paid by these defeated kingdoms were the basis of Indraprastha's prosperity The army expanded

One day, suddenly, a royal messenger from the Pandavas turned up in Hastinapura, bringing an invitation on birch-leaf to the Rajasuya Yajna The Pandavas were embarking on a massive *Yajna* on the full moon of spring, and they required the blessings of Grandsire Bhishma for the religious ceremony The family priest of the Pandavas, Rishi Dhaumya, came personally after the invitation had been given, requesting the presence of the Kauravas

Prince Yudhishthira had personally gone to various kingdoms carrying five golden jars, and brought back in them waters from the sacred rivers of Vitsata, Purushni, Ganga, Yamuna, Sindhu, Mandakini, Alakananda, Iravati, Sarayu, Charmanvati and others These waters would be mixed with the waters of the Ikshumati flowing beside the palace of Indraprastha, after which

the proceedings of the *yajna* would commence Ikshumati and Yamuna provided the confluence where Indraprastha was situated

In front of the palace, on the opposite bank of the Ikshumati, the sacrificial pavilion was erected on a vast clearing On all four sides were residential quarters and eating-houses for the guests

Such were the rumours that flooded Hastinapura

Prince Arjuna and Bhima travelled the length and breadth of the land issuing invitations Everywhere nothing could be heard except news of the *yajna* My own curiosity grew I longed to have one glimpse at least of this brand new capital But that was impossible Nor was it correct

During this period the Pandavas had succeeded in conquering an extensive empire The treasury of Indraprastha overflowed with incalculable wealth brought in from all directions on loaded carts I got to know of all this from the information circulating in the palace Only two kindoms were spared from the imperial expansion of the Pandavas— Mathura and Hastinapura

This was not really the first invitation that Indraprastha had sent Draupadi had had five sons by her five husbands Each time a son's name-giving ceremony was performed, the Queen Mother Kunti Devi sent me a special invitation But I felt that my husband might not like the idea, so I put off going on some excuse or the other But I did take steps to find out what each son had been named By Prince Yudhishthira Draupadi's son was Prativindhya, by Bhima, Sutasoma, by Arjuna, Shrutakirti, by Nakula, Shatanika and by Sahadeva, Shrutakarma Five handsome sons But the really interesting description I heard concerned Abhimanyu

Abhimanyu was the son of Arjuna by Subhadra, who was Sri Krishna's sister Like his uncle, he was dexterous and blue-skinned For convenience, the Pandavas had established a code of marital conduct Arjuna carelessly broke it, for which he was punished with a twelve year forest exile During this exile, he abducted Sri Krishna's sister from Dvaraka while he was camped on the Raivataka hill After the exile, Prince Arjuna returned to Indraprastha with Subhadra and Abhimanyu One point surprised me greatly My name was Vrishali, Arjuna's wife was Panchali (also called Draupadi), my co-wife Supriya, and Panchali's co wife Subhadra There was a distinct sound-resemblance in the names

All those connected with the Pandavas worked indefatigably for the Rajasuya Yajna Rishi Dhaumya personally informed me that the Queen Mother Kunti Devi had specifically requested that I attend I had made up my mind that I was not going to say a word of this to my husband because he would never approve By killing Sudamana Arjuna had done a heinous crime so far as we were concerned

In the course of his conversation, Rishi Dhaumya revealed some very important facts During the burning of the Khandava forest there was a pitched battle between Arjuna and the fire god Agni Pleased with the outcome, Agni had presented Arjuna with the bow named Gandiva and two inexhaustible quivers Sri Krishna received the powerful weapon called the Sudarshana chakra Bhima, who had recently returned from Jarasandha's kingdom Magadha, had obtained a divine mace from Vrishaparva, king of the rakshasas Arjuna had completed his imperial conquest on the strength of his divine Gandiva bow

These news of Indraprastha roused all my latent curiosity It was the greatest wonder of all to everyone how such an uninhabitable wilderness could be metamorphosed into a prosperous kingdom

28

In the meantime a spy of Hastinapura in the kingdom of Magadha stunned all in the palace with an incredible piece of news It upset my husband terribly He was teaching Vrishasena the 'Thorny Arm" duelling tactic when a servant brought him the news

It concerned the murder of the Raja of Magadha My husband forgot Vrishasena instantly and, shaking the servant asked, "Who has killed the mighty Jarasandha? Tell me, who?"

"Prince Bhima," was the frightened reply

"By himself? Impossible!"

"Bhagavan Sri Krishna was present "

That reply silenced my husband After the servant left, my husband kept circling the room, lost in thought, his hands clasped behind his back

I asked Vrishasena, 'Vrishu, show your father the holds he s taught you "

"Is father my equal? Call Chitrasena or Lakshmana here—and I'll show them the 'Tholy Arm' hold " He couldn't pronounce "Thorny Arm"

I thought my husband would pick him up and smell his head and correct him saying, "Not 'Tholy Arm', little one, 'Thorny Arm'," but he was too absorbed in his own thoughts Something about Jarasandha's death preoccupied him

"What's on your mind?" I tried to break him out of his reverie

"Sri Krishna," he said slowly

"Why?"

"So Sri Krishna did finish off Jarasandha after all, that's why "

"I don't think you heard the news right Jarasandha was not killed by Sri Krishna Why should Sri Krishna be involved? It was Bhima's doing "

"Sri Krishna was involved Kansa was the son-in-law of Jarasandha, and Kansa was killed by Sri Krishna To take revenge for the slaughter of Kansa, Jarasandha repeatedly attacked Mathura with a huge army, with the result that Sri Krishna in desperation had to flee Mathura He fled west—to Dvaraka That's why he arranged to get Jarasandha killed The *yajna* in Indraprastha is a celebration of the freeing of Mathura I haven't been invited to that *yajna*, Vrishali, but I have made up my mind to be there "

I was puzzled by his decision to go as an uninvited guest But I did not say anything I knew only too well how stubborn he could be Even if he gave word in a dream, he would move earth and heaven to keep it

"You are eager to meet the Sri Krishna who contrived Jarasandha's death, is that it?"

"Vrishali, a wife is half of her husband You have proved that truth That is indeed the reason—but I also want to find out from Jarasandha's general—Shishupala, Raja of the Chedis—what happened at that fatal duel What tactic Bhima employed to kill Jarasandha—I'm eager to know that "

How my husband loved duelling! He would always say, "A duel is the best test of strength "

29

A day before the full moon all the Kaurava warriors set off for Indraprastha Maharaja Duryodhana did his best to prevent any-

one from going; but Grandsire Bhishma from the start was strongly opposed to such interference. He told everyone explicitly, "If you wish to respect elders, then I, as the eldest Kaurava, advise you to attend the *yajna*. But it will not be enough just to be present. It will be required of everyone who goes to do exactly what I instruct him to do. This is not a request; it is an order."

Maharaja Duryodhana, who never gave in to anyone, could say nothing. All were familiar with Grandsire Bhishma's selflessness and valour. Whatever reservations some of them may have had at the back of their mind, the question of not following Grandsire Bhishma's instructions did not arise.

The Raja of Anga accompanied the others to Indraprastha. At the time of leaving, I performed the five-*arati* ritual and said, "Grandsire Bhishma did not include you among those who are to go to Indraprastha."

"But I have every mind to go."

"Who's pressing you so hard to go?"

"No one. It's just that I have to go. Sri Krishna will be there too, coming all the way from Mathura. *Yajna* apart, I'm dying to see him again."

"Let your wish be final then." I placed the kumkum tilak on his broad forehead. How incredibly handsome he looked with that tilak! Taking the dust of his parents' feet, he climbed into his chariot pulled by ivory-skinned horses, and sped towards Indraprastha.

He had indicated that his desire was to have a darshan of Sri Krishna. Who knows what great inspiration he was going to derive from that meeting! His words made me also want to see Sri Krishna. My husband's inspiration was also my inspiration. A wife's life is a lotus flower placed with bhakti at the feet of her husband. Her husband's happiness is her happiness.

BOOK 6

KARNA

1

Scattering clouds of dust along twisting roads, my chariot raced from Hastinapura to Indraprastha, but even swifter sped my mind on the vast vistas of my past. Swirls of memories rose in dusty swarms. Twenty full years had passed. Twenty years is a large chunk of anyone's life. It doesn't follow that a long stretch of time helps one to forget. Certainly not bitter memories. In fact, as time keeps adding, ancient memories are churned in a kaleidoscopic whirl of colours and start dancing in front of one's eyes. They play havoc with one's mind.

The wound that Draupadi's cruel words had inflicted on my self-esteem during the *svayamvara* in the presence of all the renowned suitors remained as raw as ever. An insult creates a festering hurt that doesn't heal easily, specially an insult coming from a woman. Or if it heals, a grotesque scar remains as a reminder. At the *svayamvara*, that woman had actually shouted that the life of Karna was fit for nothing but meanness, contempt, scorn, and insult. The soft supple tongue in that woman's mouth had verbally sized up the entire strong body of Karna! What worse death could there be for a warrior than this? All others run after wealth and power; but a warrior's life revolves around nobility. Which is why he can never forget disrespect and slander, never specially when they come from a low-minded woman. It is impossible for him to forgive such a woman. And so though many years had passed, her poisonous words still struck my heart with the fierce force of a tidal wave hitting a river bank. I tried very hard to remove those verbal arrows from my thoughts, but they sprouted afresh in new forms like new shoots emerging from a pruned plant. And they agitated me, they roused the lake of my mind. My son Sudamana had been lost to me during her *svayamvara*. His memory recurred. I was like a wise man who, branded a fool by everyone around him, finally starts believing it himself and starts flailing his arms as fools do. At any and every occasion I was taunted as "low-born". In the beginning I used to get furious, but when a cackling woman also hurled

that abuse at my head I began to think I was really low-born Was I like an outcaste, a chandala, or worse? I was prepared for the worst But nothing was going to stop me from taking revenge for my son's murder

One truth gave me a supreme solace in the midst of this opprobrium, and that was the love of my family members Even that solace was not total No son of mine was born with flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour—so there was every likelihood that they would be branded even more shameful than me In spite of all I did, my descendants would be considered lowcaste—this life-killing thought made me totally miserable I had only one support—my Guru who flamed in the sky A single darshan was enough to restore my vitality and banish my despair

I was racing towards Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavas—but only to meet Krishna Casually I glanced up at the sky Ashvatthaman, sitting next to me, asked, "Why are you staring so intently at the radiant Sun?"

"To see if there's even a faint dark spot in that effulgence "

"Why this expectation for what is not and can never be?"

"Because it is possible to make the impossible happen in this world Haven't I already experienced that?"

My reply silenced him We entered the city limits of Indraprastha The chief minister welcomed us in front of the palace All preparations for the Rajasuya Yajna of the Pandavas had been made in the sacrificial pavilion My eyes searched for Sri Krishna Blue-complexioned Sri Krishna seemed to me as mysterious as the blue sky itself

My astonishment exceeded limits when I saw the magnificent sky-kissing capital constructed by the Pandavas in a period of twelve years in the middle of the dense Khandava wilderness Everywhere could be seen temples, royal edifices, armouries, stables, schools, gem shops—all reaching up to the skies All the buildings were erected on the banks of the Ikshumati and the Yamuna Was this magic entirely the work of the Pandavas? No Sri Krishna must have helped them The Pandavas had received the approval of Sri Krishna Without him they were mere hopefuls, not achievers

2

I, Ashvatthaman and Duryodhana halted in front of the main entrance of the palace Duryodhana looked very troubled He had

no intention of coming to Indraprastha, but he could not refuse Grandsire Bhishma. His was a token visit as if he was carrying the weight of all the Himalayas on his chest.

The chief minister of the Pandavas stood in front of us, but all three of us felt it not proper that we enter with him. We were Kaurava warriors, not ordinary invited guests. In the meantime, Prince Yudhishthira spotted us from inside the pavilion, and immediately came out. He took Ashvatthaman's hand lovingly in his and, looking at Duryodhana, said, "Noble one, hasn't Maharani Bhanumati come with you?" Duryodhana kept silent. Yudhishthira glanced at me, startled. He fixed his gaze on my feet. All stood by, quiet.

Breaking the silence, Ashvatthaman asked him, "Yudhishthira, are all preparations for the *yajna* ready?"

"Yes, Guru's son. We are waiting for someone who's an authority on the *yajna* to turn up."

"Who?"

"Sri Krishna," Yudhishthira replied, still staring at my feet. His forehead was wrinkled.

"In that case, why not show us round the splendours of the palace until he arrives?" Ashvatthaman said, tightening under his chin the knot of the white head-cloth which had come loose during the journey.

"Come," Yudhishthira said, and instructed his chief minister to escort us inside.

Whenever Yudhishthira and I met, he made it a point of staring at my feet. Was that his way of telling me that my position was a lowly one? that I was only a charioteer's son?

We accompanied the chief minister inside the pavilion. Grandsire Bhishma, Acharya Vidura and Drona were already there, inspecting the arrangements.

That marvellous pavilion was packed full with rishis and other holy men from various countries. For a moment I felt that we were standing in front of an ashram. Kings from various territories had already taken their seats, in the enclosure reserved for royalty. Among them were illustrious names: Karakayu, Kunkada, Kanakdhvaja, Dridhadhanva, Jayadratha, Bhoja, Nandaka, Rochaman, Drupada, Senabindu, Kritavarman, and Shishupala. In the eastern section, a lavish *yajna* pit and near it a *yajna* altar had been constructed. On all four sides of the pit exquisite *alpana*-

designs had been painted; around the *alpana* sat elderly rishis on tiger-skin mats. Within their easy reach were small heaps of various kinds of firewood for the *yajna*: wild fig tree, *balvaja*, pipal, banyan, mango, champak, and others. In a short while they would be offered into the sacred fire. For the *arghya*-offering, there were golden jars filled with ghee, milk, and waters from the holy rivers; they gleamed in the light of the setting sun. In the eastern corner, the golden throne on which the *yajna*-chief Sri Krishna would be ensconced was a grand spectacle indeed.

We walked along the pavilion till we reached the steps of the palace, where we saw Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. Seeing Arjuna, the sea of my memories became agitated. He was the one to receive the blue lotus garland at the arena, and the white lotus garland at the *svayamvara*. Why? Only because he happened to be a Kshatriya. I began nocking memory-arrows on my mind's bow. He was staring straight at my flesh-ear-rings. But I don't think he was interested in talking to me. And why should he be? There was no social injunction to the effect that a Kshatriya had to speak to a charioteer's son. He *pranama-ed* Ashvatthaman, apparently under the impression that he had taken birth for the sole purpose of trampling everyone in sight.

The five sons of the five Pandavas, standing nearby, observed all this with astonishment.

"Arjuna, why are you staring so fixedly at Karna's ears? He was born with those ear-rings, just as you were born with your blue skin," Ashvatthaman, laughing, said as he placed his foot on the palace steps. He always tried his best to make light of every situation.

I lifted my head slowly to take in the spectacular presence of the palace building. On the white parapet of the balcony, I saw a lady, her left palm on the ledge. She was dressed in white. She stood there, unmoving, like a devi in a temple. I saw a yellowish string in her right hand, but not very clearly. The instant my eyes met hers, the devi-image faltered. As she made to leave, the object in her hand slipped accidentally and fell near my feet. Astonished everyone looked at my feet. Duryodhana stepped forward to pick up the object, but I forestalled him. It was a golden hand-ornament for a baby. There was no baby boy in the palace. Thinking, *For whom could the lady have ordered such an ornament, an ornament fit for princes?* I handed it to the chief minister. I glanced again in the

direction of the balcony There was no one there That white-stone balcony was shining in the rays of the setting sun

We climbed the palace steps, but that hand-ornament haunted me I asked the chief minister, "Who was the lady on the balcony?"

"The Queen Mother Kunti Devi She ordered this hand-ornament for the son of some illustrious warrior of Hastinapura, I know because I heard the instructions she gave the goldsmith I had him brought here from Mathura "

Who could this "illustrious warrior of Hastinapura" be? I asked myself and couldn't think of anyone suitable *Anyway, what concern of mine was it?* Thinking this, I dropped the matter

The chief minister started describing the palace The ancient palace of Hastinapura appeared to me to be pale and insignificant in comparison to this glorious architecture It was impossible not to praise the skill of the artisans who had constructed the numerous palaces and their halls On the walls were colourful paintings depicting the chief episodes in the lives of the Kaurava ancestors The council hall of the royal sabha was the ultimate example of the art of painting Many scenes were depicted on its walls Grandsire Bhishma abducting the daughters of the Raja of Kashi, Maharaja Shantanu gazing entranced at the fish-odorous daughter of the fisher king on the bank of the river, Maharaja Devapi renouncing his kingdom and with raised arm bidding farewell to the citizens of Hastinapura before departing to the forest for spiritual meditation, Maharaja Pandu on a hunting expedition in the forest, the deer, slain by Maharaja Pandu, transformed into a wrathful rishi, Maharaja Pandu, with a curse on his head, leaving the city with his wives with bowed heads, Maharaja Pandu, dressed in rishi's robes in a forest, with his two wives on either side, Maharaja Pandu and five boys playing in his presence Seeing all these and many other paintings made one's mind return to the recesses of the past. In comparison to the Hastinapura palace hall, this one appeared to me infinitely more attractive and elegant But I missed one thing—the image of the Sun-God Exactly where, behind the throne, the Kauravas had installed the pure gold image of the Sun-God, the Pandavas had placed the image of the blue-skinned flute-player Sri Krishna This must have been the sign of their bhakti for Sri Krishna

After the tour of the palace rooms, we visited the palace of the royal ladies Their rooms were unparalleled in elegance Vines and creepers were carved on the white stone pillars, and various dance poses also Tall mirrors for hair-dressing had been embedded in vine-and-creeper-bordered niches Scenes depicting significant events in the lives of the royal personages were painted on the walls I could recognise all of them with no difficulty, because my father had off and on narrated to me the history of the Kaurava dynasty Each painting struck me as lifelike and captivating Some scenes were obviously very ancient, but they appeared as if they had occurred yesterday

"Urvashi! Urvashi!" One painting had Maharaja Pururavas imploring the apsara and, with passionate fervour, embracing vines and trees, Nahusha leading his troops home after defeating Indra, Yayati falling at the feet of Acharya Shukra and begging forgiveness for his crimes while his wife, the rishi's lovely daughter Devayani, stood proudly near him, Shakuntala gazing curiously at her son Bharata counting the teeth of a lion, Maharani Satyavati always trying to do her best for the dissemination and glory of the Kaurava dynasty, and many more glimpses of men and women appeared vividly on the walls It seemed as if they were silently speaking their life-stories to us

There was one painting, however, that eluded my understanding, it had poignance and a fascinating mysterious quality, an unbearable intensity But it failed to rouse any compassion I couldn't make out what one was expected to feel after seeing that painting It had enthusiasm, it stirred curiosity—or was it something else? It was difficult to say It was tremendously compelling—and its arrangement of colours was superior to that of all the other paintings

One scene depicted a large river on a blue background A tottering old maid had descended to the bank and, stooping, was sliding a wicker basket inside the frothing waters Near the bank was a young girl, covering her face with her hands and sobbing From her royal dress it was clear she was an aristocratic lady A soft breeze was playing with her *anchal* A few drops of water dripped from her bodice, probably rain drops after a recent shower Why were the water drops painted white? I wondered and could not find an answer On the opposite bank of the river, the radiant orb of the sun had been painted between two mountain

peaks, and from the molten golden centre of that orb a flaming ray of light connected with the wicker basket. Was the astute artist trying to convey the idea that the maid was offering the basket to the Sun? A white cow was drinking from the river. Her pretty newborn calf, tail erect, was frisking and vainly trying to get at her teats. The painting impressed me greatly.

I gazed long at that painting and concentrated hard but couldn't recall anyone telling me anything about the scene at any time. Finally, out of curiosity I asked the chief minister, "What is this scene about, sir?"

"I am not sure myself. The Queen Mother Kunti Devi had desired such a scene to be depicted, and so I obtained the services of the finest artist in Mathura. After he had finished it, I requested the Queen Mother to come and see it. Seeing it, she was stupefied. The artist thought she was not happy with the painting, so he asked, 'Queen Mother, if I could know what was in the wicker basket I think I could do a far better job of catching the finer nuances.'"

"What did the Queen Mother reply?" I asked eagerly because that query was exactly what was in my mind.

"She heaved a profound sigh and replied that only Rishi Durvasas knew what was in the basket," the chief minister answered.

"Is Rishi Durvasas among those holy men who have come to the *yajna* pavilion?" I was touched by the poignant quality of the painting. I had to find out what was in that basket, which is what prompted me to ask.

"No," was the reply.

We came out of the room. Much as I wanted, etiquette forbade me to question further.

We saw the entire palace complex with the exception of one room. The chief minister informed us that all the objects in that room were illusions.

Ashvatthaman said jokingly, "This whole world is an illusion, if you come to that."

We did enter that room; Duryodhana led us, swinging his mace. As soon as we entered, I noticed Draupadi on the steps, surrounded by her maids. The honey-hive of remembrance stirred. Honeybees of memories began stinging the charioteer's son inside me. I suffocated, thinking she might again glare hatefully at me for

being a charioteer's son. Exactly the opposite happened. When my eyes met hers, she did not avert her glance in contempt, she met my gaze briefly, then dropped hers. Her face became flushed. She whispered in her maid's ear. I thought the look in her eyes very strange and unfamiliar. It was the kind of look that I received sometimes from Vrishali, who loved me deeply. What could she have spoken in her maid's ear? I couldn't understand what was going on.

Duryodhana was not interested in the staircase at all. He continued striding ahead, looking at all the objects of illusion. In the centre of the room was an attractively-woven carpet, so marvellous that Duryodhana raised his eyebrows in surprise. The next moment he had decided to step ahead and so, looking up, he placed his left foot on that fine carpet. It wasn't a carpet. It was a deceiving *alpana* designed by the maids of the palace with the pollen of flowers of numerous colours, it covered a small pool. The instant Duryodhana placed his foot on it, he fell inside the pool with a splash. The *alpana*-design disintegrated. Duryodhana's magnificent crown slipped off his head and disappeared in the waters. Because of the mace, he couldn't even swim out. He bobbed up and down thrice before I came forward to give him a helping hand. Laughing, he emerged, holding on to my hand. He was on the point of telling me and Ashvatthaman something in his joking way when peals of giggles, like a bubbling fountain, emanated from the ladies on the staircase. Pointing to Duryodhana, with a contemptuous look, Draupadi mockingly said to her companions, "Is it true the sons of a blind father are also born blind?' Her friends burst into cachinnations, like flocks of cackling birds.

I hated her for her mockery and her cruel comment. Her body may be fragrant, but her mind was nothing except a place of filth and smelly ugliness. She had to refer to a natural disability of Duryodhana's father in order to show her contempt for Duryodhana.

I thought: *There should be a limit to how far a woman is permitted to express herself in any situation. Certainly this should be the case with royal ladies. At least, they should learn to restrain their tongues when talking about elders.*

Disgusted with the mocking laughter of Draupadi, Duryodhana violently flung his mace in the pool. His burning gaze focused on

Draupadi, he raised his head and shouted, "Even blind fathers have sons with sight. I'll prove this to you at the right time." His robe was dripping wet, but fire flashed in his eyes. It certainly was no fault of his. Who could have called Duryodhana hot-tempered after seeing the arrogance of Draupadi?

Ashvatthaman pulled him away by his arm from the hall of illusions. I looked back at the pool. The ripples had vanished. The exquisite *alpana*-design fell into place again, but it was not as attractive as before. How could it be? The colours had all run into each other, and turned into a jumbled hotch-potch.

Duryodhana said determinedly to me, "I won't stay here one instant! Tell Satyasena to ready the chariot. I'm returning to Hastinapura now!"

He was unaware of the fact that his clothes were all drenched. Ashvatthaman made a sign to the chief minister with his eyes, who fetched a fresh garment and shawl. When Ashvatthaman showed him the clothes, he realised he was dripping wet. Ashvatthaman pointed a finger towards a vacant room, suggesting that he change. I admired Ashvatthaman's presence of mind.

Duryodhana changed, but his new clothes were too large for him. They must have been Bhima's. What a strange coincidence! I removed my crown and placed it on his head, because his had slipped inside the pool. Looking at my crown-less head, he asked, "And what about you?"

"I am not a Kshatriya, King. A charioteer's son is used to walking about without a crown,' I replied.

Still looking at my head, he said to Ashvatthaman, "He doesn't really need a crown, does he?"

"His golden curls will shame any crown," Ashvatthaman replied.

As I placed the crown on his head, Duryodhana's anger ebbed.

We left the palace, having made up our minds to return to Hastinapura, because an insult to Duryodhana was an insult to me. He and I—that we were two—was an idea unacceptable to me. He had made my life, and my future was in his hands. Draupadi by sneering at him appeared to me not just thoughtless but haughty. Every incident has a reaction. Some day or other Draupadi would pay the penalty for her behaviour.

Suddenly a joyful noise of kettledrums, drums and trumpets was heard. I enquired about it from the chief minister, who replied,

"The *yajna* is about to commence. Bhagavan Sri Krishna must have arrived from Dvaraka. This joyful welcome is for him and the Yadavas. Our kingdom has fulfilled the condition for the Rajasuya Yajna. It is required to conquer all the kingdoms of east, west, north and south before this *yajna* can be performed. The assembly of rajas present in the *yajna* pavilion are all monarchs of different territories subdued by our army. They will now rise and pay homage to the *yajna*-chief."

"Which kingdoms have been subjugated by your army?" I asked again.

"Many—Kosala, Videha, Chedi..." He reeled off a list of names. Still listening to his voice, we arrived at the pavilion.

3

We stepped hurriedly out of the pavilion because we were eager to return to Hastinapura. Duryodhana did not even look at anyone and seemed to be literally running, but Grandsire Bhishma, who was holding the hand of Raja Rukmin and entering from the main door, saw him, stopped him, and said authoritatively, "Duryodhana, have you come here to attend a *yajna* or to hunt? Go and do as I tell you. Count the animals brought here to be sacrificed and personally check if they are well looked after. And you Karna, see that you personally distribute whatever has to be gifted in charity. That's all."

The petty task entrusted to proud Duryodhana, who was already smarting under the insult of Draupadi did not please him at all. Like dark clouds of August shrouding the clear sky, creases covered his narrow forehead. Like a large black deer startling at the slightest snapping of a dry twig, he tightened his curved eye-brows. His pink eyes, as if in mortal agony, seemed to be telling him, "You are Grandsire Bhishma. I am the eldest prince of the divine Kaurava dynasty. It doesn't become you to put me to this trivial task." But he could not ignore the fact of the Grandsire's venerable seniority. Helplessly he looked once at me, lowered his head, and made his way to the animals' enclosure. The turmoil churning inside him could be surmised from his determined gait. Thinking that he needed to be consoled, I followed him. Without looking back, with his right hand he motioned me to stop, and said firmly, "Stay where you are, son of Radha. Today will be a unique day for some, but for me it will be memorable all my life for a very

different reason Duryodhana has feelings, Duryodhana also is human—they seem to have forgotten this I will show them at the right time that I too have feelings "

I realised the humiliation and agony his proud Kshatriya heart was experiencing, yet I could not utter a single word of consolation How could I? What was the difference between him and me? Only a hurt mind knows another mind's hurt Hadn't I passed through an identical humiliation all my life? Indifference and condescension I gazed at his slowly disappearing figure with sympathy His gait had lost the haughtiness of the Kauravas

I felt that Grandsire Bhishma had totally failed to understand Duryodhana

The commotion in the pavilion subsided completely and suddenly I turned and looked at the entrance Sri Krishna was alighting from a chariot pulled by five white horses Smiling gently, serene, with a slow, stately gait he entered the pavilion His blue-skinned body, like the blue *anjani* flower, glowed in the soft light of the setting sun Rukmini Devi followed him, she was wearing a finely-woven shawl, her head was bowed After them descended from various chariots Satyaki, Balarama, Ugrasena, Akrura, Uddhava, Pradyumna, Samba, Brahma-gargya and others Grandsire Bhishma hurried forward and embraced Sri Krishna warmly Seeing them embrace, I thought of a white Himalayan peak touching the blue neck of the sky Married ladies emptied the water vessels at Sri Krishna's and Rukmini's feet The Queen Mother Kunti Devi placed an auspicious kumkum tilak on his broad forehead I was reminded of my mother Radha Whenever I left home, she would bless me on my forehead with such a tilak Vidura-ji placed a garland of white flowers round his neck Sri Krishna bent, respectfully took the dust of the Queen Mother's feet and touched it to his head The assembled people in the pavilion rose in tribute Sri Krishna lifted up the rishis who were rolling in the water which had cleansed his feet In the distance was a Raja, sitting from the beginning His aloofness roused my curiosity I looked carefully and saw it was Shishupala

Yudhishthira stepped forward and, taking Sri Krishna's right hand, guided him to the splendid golden throne near the *yajna* altar Sri Krishna rested his left hand on the bare shoulder of Arjuna Because both were blue-complexioned, it was not possible to make out from the back who was Arjuna and who Sri

Krishna But I noticed a distinct difference Sri Krishna walked with an easy gait, Arjuna a little stiffly, which is normal with a very muscular person Leaning against a *thuhar*-wood pole of the pavilion, I kept observing Sri Krishna from a distance Breaking all social norms and exposing myself to criticism, I had come uninvited to see him, and my desire was now fulfilled The colour of the sky and the complexion of Sri Krishna seemed to me to match His long eyes, which stretched as far back as his ears, had a soulful expression that I had not found in any other person He was short, but had an excellent physique His eyes were large, shaded under beautiful eyelashes

Yudhishthira escorted him to his golden throne near the altar All the others also sat down The rishis squatted in lotus-postures on their tiger-skins No one took notice of me There was no reason to do so Sri Krishna happened to catch my eye briefly as he slowly surveyed the *yajna* pavilion For no reason I remembered the vista of Champanagari beside the Ganga—it appeared in front of my eyes The human mind is an astonishing thing There's no knowing when it remembers what Seeing me, Sri Krishna rose from his throne He beckoned Acharya Vidura towards him, and whispered something in the Acharya's ear I felt sorry I was not wearing a crown Perhaps that was the reason Acharya Vidura was making his way towards me But what he told me was startling "Raja of Anga," he said, "the *yajna* ceremony is about to begin Please take your seat "

"Why?" I replied "Is my standing here not proper?" and waited for an answer How could I sit in an assembly of kings without a crown on my head?

"This is not my request, but Sri Krishna's," he replied calmly I had no answer to that

I followed him quickly and sat down on a seat indicated by him An expectant hush pervaded the pavilion It was late in the afternoon, and the long all-touching finger of the setting sun's rays streamed through the main door and filled the pavilion A strange thought swam into my mind when I saw them the Acharya had shown me to my seat, but what seating accommodation was he going to provide for the sun's rays? Anyway, what necessity was there to show them a seat? They had come entirely uninvited, unconcerned about anyone's censure, and had occupied every

single seat in the pavilion, including Sri Krishna's throne How was it possible for anyone to obstruct them?

Some of the invited rajas stared at my crown-less head and began whispering among themselves Obviously my sitting there as I was struck them as inauspicious But their whispering stopped as soon as Yudhishthira stood up to speak beside the *yajna* altar. "Bhagavan Sri Krishna, Grandsire Bhishma, Acharya Vidura, Gurudeva Drona, respected rishis and assembled monarchs, on behalf of my four brothers I welcome you happily to Indraprastha We are performing this Rajasuya Yajna for the peace and prosperity of our kingdom It is our great good fortune that Bhagavan Sri Krishna is present here as the *yajna*-chief On this auspicious occasion I will personally wash the feet of our *yajna*-chief and request him to commence the proceedings by offering the *bilva*-fuel with his own hands It is our belief that with your blessings and Sri Krishna's grace our kingdom will prosper In addition, since today is the night of the full moon, we will all feast together on the bank of the Ikshumati "

He glanced significantly at his chief minister, who stepped forward with a golden salver and a golden jar filled with the blended waters of many rivers Yudhishthira placed the salver near the feet of Sri Krishna Yudhishthira, who always stared so hard at my feet, guided the feet of Sri Krishna on the salver and started pouring water on them from the golden jar The assembled rajas gazed at the ritual in silent fascination As soon as the lustration was completed, he scooped a little water from the salver in the hollow of his right palm and religiously sipped it With his expensive silk shawl he devotedly wiped Sri Krishna's feet I glanced at the blue right toe I hoped to see the scar of my arrow there, but there was no scar

The *agnihotra* priest intoned the sacred syllable Om and slid a *thali*-ful of flaming embers in the yajna altar Sri Krishna carefully picked up a bundle of *balvaja* faggots as an offering to be placed on the embers He was about to do so when the Raja of Chedi, Shishupala, rose abruptly from among the seated group of kings and, swinging his mace on to his shoulder, shouted in a sharp, hostile voice, "Stop!" He looked like an alert, infuriated bull about to attack His voice boomed like thunder clouds

All heads turned towards him in astonishment Running his fiery gaze on all the assembly till it passed and focused on Yudhish-

thira, nostrils flaring, he shouted angrily, "Yudhishthira, you who have taken birth in the noble family of the Kauravas! Are you trying to shame all of us, the heroic Kshatriyas of Aryavarta, by installing a low-caste cowherd as the *Yajna*-Chief of this ceremony?" His chest heaved. The jealousy in his heart gushed out. He was the commander-in-chief of Jarasandha and once the going-to-be husband of Rukmini, and it was natural that he would vent his fury on Sri Krishna.

I was not pleased at all by his reference to Sri Krishna as a "low-caste cowherd". Bhima and Arjuna rose, brandishing angrily mace and bow. Sri Krishna placed the *balvaja* sacred faggots in the fire, eased himself up slowly and motioned to Bhima and Arjuna to restrain themselves. They resumed their seats. Even on that occasion I was reminded vividly of one fact: though a Kshatriya, Sri Krishna had passed his early days as a cowherd's son. Fate is very much a capricious little brat doing exactly what he likes. Like a boy throwing a gold ornament on the ground and trampling it, Fate sometimes takes a brilliant man and flings him down helpless in the dust—and at the same time elevates the most impossible coward sky-high.

In the belief that no one was going to obstruct him, Shishupala left his seat and strode towards the *yajna*-altar. Brandishing his mace, and waving his arms, he lashed out with fresh hate. Sparks seemed to sizzle out of his mouth— words of heartless bitterness. "There are many heroes in this pavilion far excelling him in lustre—why have you not thought of them? There are Grandsire Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Crown Prince Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Maharaja Shalya, the Raja of the Sindhus named Jayadratha, Raja Shakuni of the Subalas, the finest Panchala Drupada, and so many other extraordinary heroes, Brahma radiant learned men like Paila, Dhaumya, Drona, Kripa, Vidura and Ashvatthaman. Be ashamed that you have forgotten them and preferred to offer your puja to a black cowherd, you have insulted them all. If you weren't so captivated by his blue-black skin, you would have realised that a far more attractive and wonderful hero was in your midst—the golden skinned Raja of Anga, Karna with his flashing invincible skin-armour. Or don't you have eyes to see?"

He stood in front of them and pointed his finger in my direction. I did not like it at all. How could I? Nobody was going to say I was

not a charioteer, that I was an emperor simply because I had skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings that stirred everyone's curiosity. He was ranting lunatic rubbish.

But his blood-red tongue babbled confusedly. "How could you ever ignore all these deserving heroes and choose as *yajna*-chief for your ceremony *a low-caste cowherd who knows nothing except* how to loiter about twisting the tails of cows? Nor could you stop right there. No, you had to go further and drink the water with which you washed his feet— feet stinking with cowdung and cow-urine—and you drank it as if it was holy water from a pilgrimage! You drank it in front of all these Kshatriyas! What else is this if not a life-killing insult? Tell me, do you have plans to turn your new kingdom into a cow-pen?" Grandsire Bhishma, Bhima and Sahadeva, unable to bear the taunts, stood up angrily. But... but there was Sri Krishna's hand again, motioning them to keep calm and sit down.

Shishupala, no more in control of himself, went on ranting: "Lustful dancer among the milkmaids! Family-killer! Murderer of your maternal uncle! Coward who turned his back on Jarasandha! Why don't you do what a cowherd should do—supply Mathura milk in pots to the sacred *yajna* of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, collect cash, and return where you came from? Aren't you ashamed to sit on that distinguished throne of gold and get your unclean feet washed by high-caste Kshatriyas?" Shishupala was ablaze with anger, like a flame-of-the-forest breaking into turbulent bloom in the month of Chaitra.

Each word he uttered created a fresh wave of fear in the listeners. Sri Krishna's neck slowly stiffened, like a cobra's. With his hands on his waist, he cautioned Shishupala for the last time: "I have till today tolerated ninetynine insults from you. I promised your mother I would forgive one hundred crimes committed by you. Now it seems that every instant your death is drawing near. Be warned! Control yourself. It is the dharma of Kshatriyas to be disciplined—and not just on the battlefield. If you stretch my patience to its extreme limit, I have no alternative but to use the Sudarshana chakra."

"Truth-tattling coward! If prowess is the true dharma of Kshatriyas, and you are indeed a true Kshatriya, come! Come into the centre of this *yajna* pavilion, and face the Raja of the Chedis in

duel!" Flinging away his mace, he fixed his eyes on Krishna, and slapped his arm-pits in deafening challenge. All waited, breathless.

I wanted to shout: *Shishupala, your little game is over. There is a limit even to the tidal waves of an ocean.*

Instantly the pavilion resounded with hundreds of musical instruments. Nobody could make out where the sounds were coming from. My eyes blurred. All eyes were focused on Sri Krishna who stood there like a lotus in a blue lake. His blue face suddenly turned serious. He closed his large eyes, like two large doors of a magnificent mansion, closing. In no time at all his body seemed to swell, like puffed rice on smouldering embers. Suddenly his blue-lotus countenance turned ember-red, blood red. Slowly, the ornament on his crown's head dress lifted till it touched the roof of the pavilion. My own body seemed to heat up in proportion to the expansion of Sri Krishna's body. I felt afraid that my seat would melt. Wave upon wave of fierce heat engulfed my body. To understand why my body heat grew in relation to his body-expansion, I concentrated my gaze on his hugely swelling frame. The massive body had four arms. The hand that earlier had grasped the bundle of faggots, now held a heavy mace with graceful ease. His back arm displayed a chakra, whirling in radiant circular energy. The back of the massive body was completely out of sight. From there emanated a tremendous noise that shamed even the roaring of clouds, a noise that exceeded the cacophony of hundreds of musical instruments playing simultaneously. It pierced through the ears of the assembly and entered their very hearts. Deep inside—no one knew how deep.

'Shishupala, you have completed a hundred crimes. Now even Brahma the Creator cannot grant you any more life. You spineless creature puffed up with the empty arrogance of your Kshatriyahood, you forget that even the ocean tides have a limit to their intensity. Be warned! And be prepared to face your death like a brave man. You have committed a hundred crimes. There will be no chance for you now to commit the hundred and first crime."

He opened his large eyes and, with Shishupala as target, released his dazzling Sudarshana chakra. Shishupala trembled like a massive bodied deodar shaking in a storm. What an instant ago appeared to be an immovable and invincible mountain now looked as helpless as a mound of dirt. What an instant ago was a face red

with the swollen pride of Kshatriyahood, now turned black at the approach of merciless Death. A tumult overtook the *yajna* pavilion. On all four sides an unbearable intense radiance appeared to be spreading. The chakra whizzed towards Shishupala. My mind was an amalgam of curiosity, surprise, anxiety, and compassion. Fearful of his life, tormented Shishupala made frantic efforts to hide behind the assembly of seated kings in order to escape the route of the refulgent discus. His thrashing about only proved how desperately a human wants to cling to life. The same Shishupala who a brief while ago had branded Sri Krishna a coward was now fleeing for his life. The kings behind whom Shishupala hoped to scurry for shelter were themselves running helter skelter to avoid the sparks that scattered from the whirling discus. Warriors who behaved like tigers on the battlefield did not dare face the chakra even for an instant. All the seats of the pavilion began quickly emptying. Harassed and trembling Shishupala hurried from one vacant seat to the other, covering his face with his hands, afraid of disfigurement from the fiery sparks. There was no trace left of his earlier Kshatriya strutting.

As he ran, he tripped on his fallen mace. Losing balance, he crashed like a boulder toppling off a mountain peak. The chakra swerved towards him murderously. He swiftly rose and slipped between the rows of seats. The scorching heat of the chakra melted the mace. Afraid that the chakra might reduce the pavilion to ashes, the rishis fled, leaving no one but I, Shishupala, and the deadly weapon inside. The cruel whirring of the chakra increased every moment. My body horripilated. Forgetting everything, I stared from my seat in wonder at that extraordinary, frightening spectacle. Never before had I been so stupefied. Sri Krishna! The marvellous mystery in that name had me spellbound.

Shishupala ran in front of my seat. Our eyes met briefly. His red face was awash with sweat, like a lotus drenched in a downpour. His eyes begged for mercy, they were filled with deep dread and heart-melting repentance. He was the consecrated Maharaja of a huge kingdom, but now he appeared to be an insignificant beggar at Death's door. But even in that hapless state he could not overcome the arrogance of his Kshatriyahood. Seeing me, he did not fearfully shout, "Save me, Karna!" Even in his desperation, he perhaps distinguished between his Kshatriya birth and my birth as a charioteer.

The whistling chakra pursued him right up to my seat. Seeing me seated peacefully, his proud Kshatriya mind flared up. *If this chakra doesn't frighten a charioteer's son, how can it harm me*—thinking this, he turned swiftly, reached out, and touched the chakra. His hand immediately shrivelled. His confidence sapped again, he scuttled behind me, like a terror-stricken rabbit. He slid his head under my seat like a snake slipping into its hole. The horrendous Sudarshana circled noisily in front of me. I couldn't even be sure who I was. My body felt an unbearable heat, like Shishupala's melted mace. I stared fixedly at the dazzling disc. The streams of light from its centre fell like the hot rays of the setting sun. It was not a chakra at all. It was as if my Sun-God had come personally to the pavilion to receive my customary *arghya*-offering at sunset. I quickly rose and joined my palms in *anjali*. I had no water in my palms, but I offered instead the homage of my feelings. It continued to circle in front of me. I had focused my sight intently on it. Countless rays of light danced before my vision.

"Karna, leave your seat. Go to the *yajna* altar." These orders came from an imposing figure that seemed to be touching the ceiling. I could not understand what I was doing. In a daze, I moved towards the altar. Reaching it, I tried to make out whose shape it was. My head reached only till the knees of that figure, which was irradiated with the swirls of light that enveloped it. Only countless swirls of irradiating light.

No sooner had I left my seat than the chakra started pursuing Shishupala. The whistling noise increased, so I turned back to look at Shishupala. Realising that there was no safety inside the pavilion, he had rushed with the speed of a chariot-horse out of the pavilion gate and beyond the palace grounds. He was not even conscious of his dress. Periodically he turned and fearfully estimated the distance between him and the chakra. He sought to hide sometimes behind the leftover stone-slabs of the palace and sometimes behind large trees. But Nature, like man, was unable to shield him. Seeing that amazing game of life and death, the hairs of all spectators stood on end. Hundreds of curious eyes followed each movement of the Sudarshana chakra.

With all hopes of escape blocked, Shishupala in despair plunged into the waters of the Ikshumati river flowing past the palace, wading deeper and deeper to evade the fatal chakra. He was still

however facing the pavilion Feet, thighs, hips, and chest—slowly, bit by bit, the waters swallowed his body Only the neck was visible as he plunged deeper inside Then, helpless, he paused Perhaps he had made his last decision and closed his eyes Hiding his face in his scarred hands, he had collected all his mental energies together to face the ultimate fact of death The chakra swiftly severed his head from his body Like a lovely lotus shorn from its stalk, his head vanished in the flowing waters of the Ikshumati Once-confident Shishupala was now no more The chakra also shot inside the waters, as if it wanted to slice even the insolent tongue

The vast waters of the Ikshumati sparkled in the light of the setting sun, but they were not as clear as they used to be Some of the ripples were red My mind was numb with wonder, pity, bewilderment and curiosity Transfixed like a wrestling pole in the ground, I stood near the altar gazing at the vast Ikshumati I saw nothing except the rippling waves Only waves, wordlessly lapping In my mind questions lapped like waves Who was Sri Krishna? Where did the deadly Sudarshana chakra come from? Why was it unable to affect my body? Who was I? Had I wanted, could I have saved Shishupala today? Why did my body heat up as Krishna's body expanded? Countless questions rose in my mind, but not one of them found an answer

What was the difference between that divine body and mine? In order to find an answer, I cast my eyes at the ceiling on the back There was nothing there On the golden throne placed by Yudhishthira sat short, dark-bodied Sri Krishna, his right elbow on the right arm rest and his right palm cupping his right cheek, smiling gently as he gazed at me That golden throne appeared much too large for him

I couldn't tell what was truth and what fiction The crowd of rajas, warriors and rishis rushed in and began prostrating themselves in front of the golden throne Sri Krishna said calmly to the holy men, "The sun is setting Let the auspicious hour not slip by The first offering of the Rajasuya Yajna must be poured into the sacrificial fire before the sun goes down "

Forgetting the hair-raising events, the entire pavilion again became a flurry of activity The rishis started intoning their mantras Yudhishthira once again washed the feet of Sri Krishna, who rose alowly and offered a bundle of *balvaja*-sticks in the fire

Then, one after the other, the rishis droned their mantras and poured the sacrificial fuel into the *yajna* The smoke of the sacred fire rose thickly in front of my eyes Swirls of smoke! Smoke from the *yajna* in front of my eyes Smoke of bewilderment and doubt in front of my mind Why did Sri Krishna never hurl his Sudarshana chakra at Jarasandha? Why did he leave for Dvaraka after the harassment of Jarasandha's attacks? How could Jarasandha, whom I had defeated, succeed in defeating Sri Krishna? It made no sense at all

I touched the end of the shawl to my eyes to wipe the tears that came as a result of the acrid smoke I felt a hand on my shoulder It was Ashvatthaman

'Why don't you also make an offering in the fire?" he said to me, gazing calmly at the waters of the Ikshumati

I went with him and offered a bundle of *audambara-* sticks in the fire As we left the pavilion, tall Ashvatthaman, lost in thought, said softly to me, "I can't make out anything "

"Can't make out what?"

"I mean, about Sri Krishna Shishupala, whom Sri Krishna killed today—you know who he was?"

"Who?'

'Sri Krishna's father's sister s son Sri Krishna's father Vasudeva had a sister who was married to Raja Damaghosha of Chedi Her name is Shrutashrava Shishupala is the son of Damaghosha and Shrutashrava He is Sri Krishna's first cousin '

I kept silent I had no desire to say anything Only one question kept revolving in my mind *Who is Sri Krishna?*

4

The Rajasuya Yajna ended, and we prepared to return to Hastinapura carrying with us a host of unforgettable memories My mind was full of confused ideas about Sri Krishna The chariot raced towards Hastinapura, and I took over the reins from Satyasena The horses galloped with manes flying, urged by my cracking whip My mind was disturbed

I went personally to meet Sri Krishna on the day of the *svayamvara* in the kingdom of Panchala He received me smiling and we discussed various subjects When Duryodhana's name cropped up in my conversation, he deftly interrupted me with a strange

question He asked, "Karna, what will happen to a fiercely self-willed lion if he is placed among a herd of sheep?"

"What else? He'll make mincemeat of the sheep," I replied.

"But it doesn't always happen like that. Sometimes he forgets his own self and starts behaving like a sheep himself."

"That's impossible Why is he known as the king of the jungle if that's the case?" I countered

He smiled and said, "Let's drop the subject It's best if you don't take part in the *svayamvara* today At least, stay away until I lift my right toe as a signal "

So I waited for the signal But it so happened that I couldn't take part in the *svayamvara* anyway Had he done wrong by suggesting that signal to me? I fired that sharp arrow at his toe in order to find an answer But there was not even a scar on his right toe—at least, I couldn't see one at the *yajna* How could that wound have healed so completely in so short a time?

All memories associated with Sri Krishna ended up in mystery—a mystery so complex that one drowned in its depths His behaviour at the *yajna* was so baffling that it forced everyone to speculate on his intentions Suddenly he loomed as tall as the ceiling, and, as suddenly, he despatched his aunt's son out of this world and, resuming his normal size planted himself on the throne All very bewildering Like a chariot-wheel revolving around its hub, my mind revolved around Sri Krishna, until it reached the conclusion that Sri Krishna was a supernatural being

I asked Duryodhana, who was sitting next to me in the chariot, 'What are your feelings about Sri Krishna?"

'Karna, you are an illustrious hero, and yet you have fallen under the magic spell of that black sorcerer " His thick eyebrows rose

"Sorcerer!" I exclaimed loudly, as if lightning had struck me

"What else? Changing shape, making all kinds of different sounds of various instruments—who but a sorcerer can do all this?' He said this easily, as if nothing extraordinary had happened

His unexpected reply confused me further Was my life going to be all a mass of perplexities? Needling thoughts were ripping open my skull My head seemed to be exploding I raised my left hand to press my head As soon as the hand touched my crown, my astonishment broke all limits My own crown was clearly visible on

Duryodhana's head Removing my crown hurriedly, I looked at it It was the exact duplicate of the ceiling-touching crown of Sri Krishna On *my* head? How? I had no answer

I whipped the horses harder They reached Hastinapura with the speed of wind I had left the city, attracted by Sri Krishna, returning, I brought with me a bundle of never-ending questions regarding Sri Krishna The basic question was Why didn't Sri Krishna's chakra consume me? Because of my impenetrable armour—was that the only reason? The second question was How was it that, on his command, I went to the altar like an obedient servant? And the third When and how was the crown of Sri Krishna placed on my head—and who placed it?

5

The noble chief minister of the Pandavas had in clear terms explained to us how the Pandavas had fulfilled the conditions of conquering all the kingdoms for the Rajasuya Yajna The long list of the kingdoms boomed in my ears They had selected each quarter by turn and overcome all the kingdoms falling in that territory They had loaded their treasury with tribute extracted from the subjugated Kings in the form of gold, silver, coins, diamonds, rubies, coral, pearls, gems, cat's eyes, topazes, sapphires, cattle and slaves The foundation of any kingdom is wealth No kingdom functions without wealth If by any chance it does, it cannot continue so for long That is why I felt in Indra prastha that I too should embark on a policy of world conquest The Pandavas had conquered the world quarter by quarter, I made up my mind to subjugate all the eight directions single handed

I gave serious thought to how many rulers I would have to conquer—how prosperous they were—and what was the best time of year for a successful world-conquest

I decided to commence with the eastern part To the east of Hastinapura were two powerful kingdoms—the Panchala territory of Raja Drupada, and the Magadha of Raja Jarasandha Besides, there were Kosala, Ayodhya, Kashi, Videha, Vatsa, Kuntala, Munda, Pundra, Utkala Odra, Anga, Vanga and others

To the south the strongest kingdom was Sri Krishna's Mathura of the Yadavas, also known as the kingdom of Shurasena Besides, in the south there were also Shalva, Chedi, Kurusha Dasharna,

Avanti, Nishada, Mekala, Southern Kosala, Vainika, Vidarbha, Maharatha, Anarta, Malva, Matsya and others Near Anarta was the new kingdom of Dvarika on the western coast, established by Sri Krishna

To the west were two dominant kingdoms—one, Madra, ruled by Ritayana's son Shalya, and the second Bahlika Apart from these were Vatadhana, Saubhira, Sindhu, Panchanada, Ambashtha, Trigarta, Kaikeya, Shibi, Kamboja, and Gandhara To any world conqueror, the west provided the most formidable opposition

To the north were the Kulinda, Rakshasa, Tangana, Khasha, and Kirata kingdoms

No matter how expeditiously I went about the military operation, it would take no less than six months to subdue all these territories

There was one thing I had to observe with the strictest discipline However strong I became, I must refrain from attacking Mathura and Dvarika It did not matter to me how the world interpreted my decision

6

We arrived in Hastinapura safely, but Duryodhana's mind was in turmoil He would wake up in the middle of the night, shoulder the mace that lay near his bed and, mumbling "I'm not going to stay a second more in Indraprastha," try to run outside the palace Rani Bhanumati would sprinkle cold water on his burning fore head and shaking him firmly by his shoulders, reassure him that he was very much in Hastinapura Returning to the real world, he would clasp his hands behind his back and start pacing the room like a lion in a cave At times he would send Prabhanjana to call me in the middle of the night

When I came near him, his fingers tightened further, and he harassed me with all kinds of questions

'Karna, I'm surprised that I have survived counting the sacrificial animals at the Pandavas' *yajna* Why shouldn't I finish them once and for all instead of having to endure in my heart every single second these cruel and bitter incidents, as terrible as death itself? Imagine, my respected father was insulted for his blind ness—and that too by a thirdclass female! Ah! I wish I could cut

off her tongue which spewed out such flaming embers of words, and smash her venomous teeth! If I cannot smash her teeth, why am I living as a Kaurava? For what purpose? Tell me, Karna!"

I tried consoling him by placing my hand on his shoulder. That helped, but he was like a deceptive ocean, calm on the surface—there was a storm inside him of which there was no outer sign. Once he suddenly took my hand in his and suggested that we take a walk outside the bedroom. In order not to hurt him, I complied. He took me straight to the throne of the Kauravas in the royal assembly hall. I had never been so close to that throne till then. Pointing to the golden image of the Sun behind the throne, glowing softly in the light of the torches, he said, "Karna, if you really care for me, then take a vow by this insignia of the solar dynasty that you will never forsake me. Karna, I have started feeling that I am all alone."

"Did you ever feel the need for such a vow earlier?"

"I feel it today. I don't want advice, nor do I want cold facts. I want the sacred word of your eternal friendship."

"If that is what will console you, then you have my word." I placed my hand in his extended palm. Nearby, a spark flicked off the torch on the stone pillar and fell on my hand. My impenetrable skin-armour prevented any burn.

7

Any chance I got, I advised Duryodhana to forget all the unpleasant incidents of his life. The ability to forget is a rare quality, and not easily obtained by everyone. I wanted him to shake off the bitterness of the past, but I had not been able to do so in my own life. My efforts resembled those of a wounded person who, while looking after his own bruises, simultaneously soothes another's. But I had to do it. Sometimes one has no choice.

"I will never agree to be the bride of a charioteer." These venomous arrowy words of that lovely but haughty woman produced unbearable fiery pain in my heart. I was well settled as a householder. Father of seven sons, and husband of two beautiful wives—yet the memory of Draupadi pricked me as intensely as the screams of a deer whose heart is pierced by an arrow. Memories! How will those who think that memory is a vessel of fragrances or a peacock feather ever understand that memories to a warrior

insulted by a woman are like the flaming sands of the desert? Out of that desert emanate only the licking heat-waves of vengeance The tender seeds of discipline, large-heartedness and forgiveness wither in those heat-waves

Twentyfive years vanished in the womb of Time I have heard that Time is the divine healer of all sorrows This was not my experience Only one thought gripped my mind in these twentyfive years *What if I had been born a Kshatriya?* Indeed, it was something to think about—what turn would my life had taken had I been a Kshatriya? Would I have become like Raja Duryodhana, or like Uncle Shakuni, or like Shishupala? They were all Kshatriyas Would I have relished being like them? These and similar questions ringed me But not one satisfactory answer was forthcoming

I and Duryodhana—our lives day by day, hour by hour, were getting more and more entangled Who would support who—that was the chief question No matter what, it was my duty to help out Duryodhana

To keep him happy some pastimes were essential—hunting, water cruises, chariot-racing, gambling, and similar activities I loathed gambling, but Uncle Shakuni was an expert in the art The two of them—uncle and nephew—could throw dice for hours on end I neither understood the boring game of those ugly pieces nor could I find any enjoyment in it

At Duryodhana's request I would sit behind him and observe detachedly the uninspiring play Looking at the dice board it struck me that my own life was a little like that board Four strips—vertical and horizontal And countless squares of promises, defamations, and humiliations

In one such game I noticed that Duryodhana had lost all his stakes Not one throw came out right for him that day All came in Uncle's favour Angry with himself, Duryodhana threw out the dice board

Uncle smiled and said, 'Silly one, don't throw out the board If you so wish, this is the same board that will make you pulverise the Pandavas '

"How is that possible? How can two cubits of cloth and four cheap cowries pulverise hill huge Bhima? '

Uncle Shakuni narrowed his eyes, stroked his black beard with the thin fingers of his left hand, pondered briefly, and replied,

"How does a tiny goad tame a hill-huge elephant to follow the right path? With these five cowries I will tame the five Pandavas in the same way "

"I have always thought highly of your intelligence, Uncle But today I'm beginning to have doubts " Duryodhana said this because he could not fathom Uncle Shakuni's mind

"A confused mind sees confusion everywhere That's your problem You've lost all sense of proportion You haven't slept for nights because the insult of Draupadi haunts you That's why you speak the way you do " Each word of his was heart-wounding

"Uncle, what wrong have I said? You're thinking of wrapping up the five hill-strong Pandavas in the four strips of cloth that make this dice-board—I think that's an impossible dream "

"Not only the five Pandavas, but I can wrap up their dear-as-life Draupadi and the Queen Mother Kunti as well in the four strips of this dice-board Only they are brave who have the habit of dreaming brave dreams and who try to make them come true "

'But how is this possible? There's a world of difference between dream and fact There's nothing which says that all the dreams of a brave man will come true "

"You are certainly a raja, but you don't have the psychological insight into human beings that goes with being a king If you had, you would have been the first to admit that it is perfectly possible to ruin an intelligent man by taking advantage of his addiction "

"Addiction? Who are you referring to? And addicted to what?"

"Prince Yudhishthira is addicted to gambling "

' How does that concern us?"

"If once—just once you could persuade Yudhishthira to play dice with his uncle Shakuni You got all worked up, and in your confusion you threw away the dice-board I could get Yudhishthira infinitely more worked up."

"Uncle, the things you say! He isn't such a fool He's not going to set foot in Hastinapura again "

' Not by himself, true The whole trick is how to get him here Snakes that hide in holes are not easily scuttled out You have to smoke them out "

"And how do you propose to smoke him out?"

"With the smoke of a *yajna* He won't come for any ordinary reason, but he'll certainly come for dharma His title is Dharma—or have you forgotten? '

"*Yajna*?" Duryodhana said, narrowing his forehead

"That's right *Yajna* A *yajna* far grander than the Rajasuya Summon the chief minister Vrishavarman and have the invitations sent out today itself," Uncle replied, clacking the cowries in his palm The cowries in his hand seemed to me to be like the frightening eyes of a dead man There was nothing in what he said that indicated dignity I listened carefully to their conversation, but I smelt the odour of dirty politics in Uncle's remarks and, opposing him, I said, "Uncle, you are called the king of Subala Are you going to use the hand that wields a sword against enemies on the battlefield and humbles them to the dust to throw cowries and string a noose around the necks of the Pandavas? I don't think this does you any credit "

"Karna you know nothing of politics Politics is not practised by the strength of one's arms or by generous fellow-feeling It needs the exercise of brain A simple person like you will take an axe and like a madman spend his life trying to level a massive forest, but but a man like me will reduce that forest to ashes with the help of a single spark Come, I stake eight times for the eight directions " Saying this, he suddenly turned and played the cowries on the board They fell exactly as predicted He jumped up and shouted, 'Look! Eight! A perfect eight!"

His harsh voice sent a shiver up my spine Was Uncle a great warrior or just a brilliant dice-player?

I rose and went out I had seen many kinds of people in my life, but Uncle Shakuni was in a class by himself Lost in thought, I arrived at Vrishali's mansion As I entered, Vrishasena and Sushena clung to my legs And little Vrishaketa lisped, "Faa th er!" and swayed forward to greet me Seeing the three of them, I forgot all about Uncle and politics

8

'Raja of Anga, the *yajna* will be performed on the auspicious day of Krishna-chaturdashi " I received the information from the chief minister himself, who had never before come to my palace This surprised me

"The fourth day of the dark fortnight? Is Duryodhana going ahead with the *yajna* with the Amavasya sitting on his head?"

"Yes Uncle Shakuni has chosen the day There's no way of changing it "

'Uncle Shakuni? Who will be the chief of the *yajna*?"

Uncle Shakuni himself To ensure that all the rituals are performed with devotion, the Maharaja has requested you to stand in the Ganga and to offer obeisance to the Sun God at the Brahma-muhurta on that day I have come personally to inform you of this " As he rose to go, a servant searching for him entered the room with a golden platter covered with silk cloth He bowed and placed the platter on a three-legged shisham wood table

What's this?' the chief asked raising his eyebrows

A messenger has arrived from Indraprastha with this platter He's waiting outside in the guest-house '

The chief minister removed the silk covering In the platter were a golden crown and a golden mace

Both were Duryodhana's Seeing them, memories scurried like red and black ants from the ant-hill of my mind Duryodhana dunked in the lake the deceptive design of coloured pollen "A blind father's son will naturally be blind" All these pictures danced in front of my eyes

"Chief Minister, return this platter to Indraprastha with the largest shawl and dress in Duryodhana's wardrobe," I instructed him appropriately Which other platter was fit to return the vestures of huge Bhima?

The servant picked up the platter and followed the chief minister Seeing the golden crown, the *chittar*-bird of my mind started preening its variegated plumes of memory

I had placed my crown on Duryodhana's head the day Shishupala was decapitated, but there was a crown on my head when I returned Who had placed it there? When? Why was it exactly like Sri Krishna's crown? I never got answers to these queries

I went to the ornaments room and gingerly lifted the crown Slowly I wiped the specks of dust with my shawl As I ran my hand on the engravings, an unfamiliar sensation of pain coursed through my body What was the secret of this crown that could so numb me? I loaded my head with all kinds of questions, but no answer was forthcoming When you come to think of it, life is filled with mysteries There's no shortage of them around oneself But only

one or two mysteries really strike the mind as important They haunt the mind—and one yearns to find their meaning

I re-placed the crown carefully on its stand Curiosity is like fungus which spreads all over a single rock-incident, fed with the water of the mind There is only one way of stopping this fungoid growth throw away the rock I removed the crown from sight, and closed the door of the ornaments room

9

Duryodhana began making preparations for the *yajna* Workers from Hastinapura went to neighbouring kingdoms to gather the required materials for the *yajna* But no one got to know why Duryodhana despatched Duhshasana to Magadha Even I had no inkling of these clandestine dealings in the palace

Duhshasana returned from Rajagriha, the capital of Magadha, in fifteen days I immediately asked him the reason for his Magadha visit He replied tersely, "Preparations for the *yajna*," and cleverly evaded the point

I should of course have been pleased with Duryodhana's plan for the *yajna* but I wasn't He was bent on making a public exhibition of his wealth at this *yajna* Wealth is an essential requirement in life but I do not think it should be flaunted It wasn't right at all that Uncle Shakuni gamble at this exhibition

Duryodhana was becoming the victim of every plan of Uncle Shakuni Seeing this made things difficult for me I had given him word of eternal friendship Friends are not those who flatter in fine times and keep silent in hard times To Duryodhana I was a friend dear as life itself Wasn't it my duty to explain the wiles of Uncle Shakuni to Duryodhana? Wasn't it Uncle Shakuni's decision to hand over the dense wilderness of Khandava to the Pandavas as their kingdom? It was he who now pushed the snake-idea of the *yajna* in Duryodhana's head Duryodhana was easily influenced, so I went one day to his palace to warn him in advance

I had expected him to be alone, but Princess Duhshala was with him Seeing me, she rose She was eyeing my flesh-ear-rings askance—something I didn't like I was getting fed up with my ear-rings They had stuck to my ears for forty years, and I still didn't know why They were the cause of my becoming the cynosure of so much curiosity

Determined not to show my face to Duhshala, I sat down behind a massive pillar Duryodhana was astute enough to notice my predicament He sent Duhshala away with the words, "Tell Duhshasana to come here immediately "

As she went away with bowed head, I brought up the subject "King, you believe in valour, don't you?"

"Karna, valour is a Kshatriya's life, and I am a Kshatriya But why this question?"

"In that case, why don't you choose valour as the means to implement your ambitions?"

'Not all ambitions are achievable by valour That's why And, after all, politics also requires valour, doesn't it?' He said this, knowing what was at the back of my mind

"What kind of valour can be associated with politics?"

"A brave brain " He clacked the cowries in his fist

"Do you really believe that this valour you mention is becoming to a Kshatriya?"

"Why not? Do you believe that Sri Krishna killed valiant Jarasandha by the strength of his arms? Politics is not a straight-shooting arrow that goes direct to its target It's a snake-arrow that twists and turns according to the circumstances And when have the Pandavas ever abided by this valour that you speak so highly of?"

"What have they done?"

"What *haven't* they done? The way they behaved in childhood with me, Duhshasana, and all my brothers was no better than the way one behaves with a servant Anyway, let's forget about me How can you ever forget the way you have been insulted? Don't you still feel the whipping you received from Bhima in the stadium? Have you forgotten the venomous taunts of Draupadi? You were physically strong enough, why didn't you retaliate against their barbaric misbehaviour? Tell me, if valour is indeed the mainstay of life, why are you silent? The least you can do is take revenge against the person who, in the auspicious *swayamvara* pavilion, so cruelly slaughtered your son . "

"Revenge! Revenge! What kind of ideas have entered your head! I can't understand anything "

"Revenge is never the root feeling in a man It is the reaction of an insulted mind You should never hurt anyone's self-respect And if hurt self-respect reacts revengefully, don't get upset Has

anyone cared to find out why, for over twentyfive years, my mind has become what it has become? Duryodhana has been ignored in this palace teeming with servants and soldiers The person whom I revered all my life, Grandsire Bhishma, has demeaned me lower than animals by ordering me to count the animals for the *yajna* of the Pandavas Tell me, Karna, how can I forget all these things?"

"You can at least try You'll go mad if you wish to live with a heap of bitter memories '

"Karna, it's easy to give advice and difficult to set an example Can you swear by your precious-as life flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour that you have completely forgotten the heart-piercing hurtful bitter shouts of 'Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!'"

He left me answer-less His words roused the lion of long-lost memories sleeping in the cave of my body With the exception of Duryodhana, no one had given me such loving sympathy Hadn't everyone, taking advantage of every occasion, fitted the arrows of ridicule on the bow of their tongues, fired them at me from all sides I was a warrior, an archer, the Raja of Anga, I had skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings—weren't all these self-estimations false? Insulted by all, and accepted only by Duryodhana, what was I except a mere charioteer? Because I was brought up in a thatched hut, I had no acquaintance with the subtleties of politics So whatever Duryodhana did, was fine Who was I to advise him? A charioteer's son like me could afford to calmly swallow bitter insults, but a raja like Duryodhana would never tolerate them It is true, indeed, that the mind of a charioteer is like a horse Anyone can whip his back

"I'll take leave of you " Saying this, I rose I couldn't make head or tail of anything

' Angry? Sit " He took my hand and forced me to sit down Glancing at the cowries in his palm, he said gravely, "Everyone thinks I am cruel and unreasonable Do you think so too? Tell me "

"Of course not You are the eldest and the finest of the Kaurava princes You know what's good or bad for you But, as a friend, I certainly want to tell you that before you accept any advice of Uncle Shakuni, you should think twice "

He transferred the cowries to my palm and said, "In a few days you'll get to see how much more powerful than you or I these cowries are People like Uncle Shakuni whom I have retained in

my royal assembly are not a group that's about to go on a pilgrimage You'll learn the truth of this in a few days "

"No matter what you say, I am not in favour of this gambling match " I flung the cowries on the seat They rattled, wobbled, then were still Duryodhana glared at me, then at the cowries, and gingerly picked them up His pink eyes changed colour Staring fixedly at me, he said, "I know you don't gamble, but for my sake throw these cowries once at least Think of a number, and play '

He handed me the cowries I felt pity for his temperamental yet stubborn nature He knew I loathed gambling, yet he wanted me to play the cowries The moment I held the cowries, I felt an irresistible urge to rush to the window and throw them out

He shook both my hands and said, "Why the silence? Name the number, and throw the dice One throw is enough to tell you how lucky you are "

"Lucky! Lucky! If these cowries are bringers of luck, then I stand opposed to it and I declare it loudly So I'll think of the number one!" Shouting "One!" I played the cowries They rattled and stopped Not one—but five

Duryodhana should have been overjoyed seeing the result, but he wasn't Forgetting himself, he kept staring at the cowries, as if he was trying to find someone in these bone pieces A thick web of wrinkles furrowed his forehead like a woven tapestry Drops of sweat gleamed on the tip of his sharp nose He rose from his seat and, with his hands behind his back, he walked to the window and gazed into the distance I rose to speak to him, but he turned back Narrowing his eyes, he asked irrelevantly, "Karna, did you and Jarasandha ever fight a duel?"

"Yes," I replied I couldn't make out why a person who a second ago was deciding my fate by the throw of dice was now interested in my duel with Jarasandha Staying with him, I had come to realise that he was given to asking abrupt and unrelated questions

"And did you spare Jarasandha's life in that duel? Did you let him free from your Thorny-Arm hold?"

"Yes We had gone to Rani Bhanumati's *swayamvara* in the kingdom of Kalinga—the time you carried off the bride You never knew what happened later. Jarasandha angrily challenged me to a duel, and when my Thorny-Arm hold had him fatally pinned down, he begged me to spare his life Which I did "

"Karna, if I were to ask you for something today, would you have qualms about granting it?" He narrowed his eyes further as he asked this

"Ask anything, even my life, but don't ask me to gamble "

"All I ask you is that you should *not* gamble Not just that, but when the gambling is going on during the *yajna* ceremony you should be conspicuous by your absence If you decide to be present, then keep silent while the game is played "

'That's all? If it pleases you, I shall keep completely silent during the gambling " I rose to go, and Duhshasana entered He picked up the cowries as if they were gold coins Placing them in Duryodhana's hands, he said, "Who flung these precious cowries like that? Do you people want me to go to Magadha again?'

Oh, so Duhshasana went to Magadha to get these cowries? These had to be brought from all that distance! What was so special about them? Perhaps both of them knew the answer I had no great desire to know why

10

There was nothing improper in Duryodhana's plan to hold a *yajna* Who would not like to support an activity of dharma? But I was very unhappy at the inclusion of Uncle Shakuni's name as chief of the *yajna* I had thought of inviting Sri Krishna for that purpose Had Gurudeva Vidura been sent to Dvaraka, Sri Krishna would certainly have accepted By choosing Uncle Shakuni, Duryodhana placed the rudder of the royal Kaurava ship in his hands as it were Now his decisions would determine their direction My life was merely the mast of the ship—right in the centre but unable to influence the course of events—swaying with every new set of circumstances Nodding its head to the whims of the vessel I couldn't forsake Duryodhana, but neither could I support every plan of his

The growing splendour of the Pandavas not only amazed Duryodhana, it also made him apprehensive He called many meetings of the royal assembly, and at each meeting he placed the same question before Maharaja Dhritarashtra *What was the best way of dimming the glory of the Pandavas?* With that as his sacred formula he allowed himself to luxuriate in the grotesque, risible dream of annihilating the Pandavas

On one occasion he worked out a plan of getting Draupadi in his control I felt sorry for his so-called political leadership then His intention was to create jealous misunderstandings between Draupadi and her five husbands A skilful maid was despatched to Indraprastha, and instructed to use her wiles to sow dissension among the Pandavas Finally, I was forced to remind him that it was highly unlikely that a wife so devoted that she happily passed her days when her husbands were no better than beggars would practise deceit now when they were so obviously prosperous Uncle Shakuni whispered all kinds of unimaginably wicked suggestions to Duryodhana—all in the sweet name of "politics' During one of the sittings of the royal assembly, Maharaja Dhritarashtra asked me, "Tell us, Karna, what are your views regarding the Pandavas?" Many members of the assembly were under the impression that I, like Uncle Shakuni, would come forward with another brilliant scheme of humbling the Pandavas that would astonish one and all But clearly they had not understood Karna Karna's nature simply did not contain any kind of intriguing political chicanery Some of them had not yet realised this—a fact which pained me To resolve the Pandava problem once and for all, I addressed the assembly, "The prosperity of the Kauravas does not lie in incurring the enmity of the Pandavas I am totally in agreement with this assessment of Grandsire Bhishma Enmity can never be life's concern But if it is the general consensus that the prosperity of the Pandavas is a threat to the Kauravas, then let us pre empt the armies of the Raja of Virata, Drupada, and declare war on the Pandavas Let the battlefield decide who should survive and who not " Not one warrior in the royal assembly agreed with my proposal The truth of the matter was that, with the sole exception of Pitamaha Bhishma, all the warrior-members of the royal assembly were afraid of the Pandavas Their heinous plots were the products of their dwarfish valour Listening to them, I felt deeply hurt At times I would leave the assembly midway and, taking Shon with me, go to the bank of the Ganga and silently sit there Seeing the transfixed white cranes patiently waiting to plunge their beaks for a fish-meal, I thought of the Kauravas as a flock of similar cranes With the exception of the single opposer, Bhishma, there was no other Garuda, no other bird king in that group of cranes This upset me

Whatever was happening around me, was to me clear as day-light. But it did not please me at all. There was no one in the Kaurava royal assembly to whom I could speak my mind. Who except Duryodhana looked on me seriously as the king of Anga? I had regard for Duryodhana, but that did not mean that I agreed with all his plans and policies.

The greatest misfortune that I had to face was that all the citizens of Hastinapura had made up their minds that every action of Duryodhana, however minor, had the approval of Karna. No one gave thought to the fact that Karna came of humble stock. Karna had personally, with bowed head, experienced how insufferable injustice can be. Anyone who has experienced injustice will never wield the weapon of injustice against another. That was why I could never see eye-to-eye with Duryodhana and Uncle Shakuni. On the other hand, I must admit that I was unable to convey my values to them. Actually, there was nothing in what I said that was so difficult to comprehend. Straight talk—and clean war—war which befitted warriors and brought them glory. But Duryodhana's mind was not healthy enough to listen and think seriously of these matters. It doesn't follow that if a person is physically close to you, he is also mentally close. Every individual is a distinct, separate, and mysterious unit of different ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

From my point of view I had only one duty: to help out in his *yajna* with all the means at my command. Whether one likes it or not, duty has to be performed.

The same *yajna* cannot be performed twice by one family. That is why our *yajna* was called the "Mahayaga".

11

The palace overflowed with the materials for the *yajna*. Duryodhana's workers spared no efforts. In front of the palace, a magnificent pavilion was constructed, rivalling that of the Pandavas in grandeur. Invitations had been sent to Shaunaka, Bhrigu, Chyavana, Kanva and other respect-worthy rishis. The kings of neighbouring territories had also been invited.

The Krishna-chaturdashi day dawned. Not dawned, rose dark and overpowering, because from early morning the soft-blue umbrella of the sky was a mass of dense, black clouds. This

disturbed my mind Not a speck of light anywhere—only a feeling of suffocation

I was supposed to stand waist-deep in the Ganga and offer my *arghya*-homage to the Sun-God for the success of Duryodhana's *yajna* I had decided to remain standing until the first sanctified faggots were offered in the sacred fire

I left my home to make my way to the Ganga Every day, at dawn, Shon's wife Meghamala drew an *alpana*-design in front of the Vishnu temple That day, however, there was no design visible Then I saw her, humming to herself and sketching a pattern Hearing my footsteps, she rose, gracefully covering her head In her hurry to get up, she dropped her five-ingredient bowl The white *alpana* powder, blood red kumkum, and yellow turmeric powder got mixed up She considered the dropped bowl as an inauspicious omen Whatever one might say, women tend to have pious minds Meghamala froze and stiffened for a second, the next instant she stretched her hand to restore the *alpana*-design Seeing her flustered, I said to her smilingly, "Let the *alpana* be The streaks of red and yellow on that white look beautiful" Without a word, she left the smudged *alpana* as it was, and went away I kept looking for a long time at that colourful *alpana* mess

With the red, yellow and white still in my mind, I climbed down the steps of the palace Every individual's life consists of such steps—the incidents of a life Sometimes nature places these steps in consecutive order and takes the individual in no time at all to the highest pinnacle of his ambition Sometimes it drops him down these very same steps into the darkest pit of degradation I came down the steps and reached the level ground

The open courtyard of the palace was in front of me In the pond in the courtyard, there was no sign of the sun's orb in the sparkling waters The only reflection in it was the dirty, white cloth of the pavilion's ceiling There were some royal swans circling the pond with lifted necks Seeing those pure-white birds, I was reminded of Uncle Shakuni The royal swan is credited with being able to retrieve the milk from water-mixed-with-milk—he had shown that to me and Ashvatthaman And it struck me then that a human being too in his life chooses from good-and-evil mixed, holy and unholy mixed, exactly as he alone decides

With a last curious look at the swans, I turned towards the chariot-houses Satyasena was shifting the chariots of the

Kauravas and making room for the vehicles of the guests A large number of invitees was expected at the Mahayajna

Seeing me, he came near I asked him to yoke my usual white-horsed chariot, which he did in a short time Flicking the whip on the horses' backs, he said, "Where to?"

"To the bank of the Ganga," I said, looking at the workers putting the finishing touches to the decorations of the *yajna* pavilion

According to the norm, I should have gone alone to the Ganga's bank It struck me that I was needlessly taking Satyasena with me, but it was not proper that I order him to go back now Sometimes a man does the wrong thing for no apparent reason That was the kind of wrong I did by taking him with me

All the thoroughfares of Hastinapura were teeming with crowds of people, but no one seemed enthusiastic about their activities It could have been the overcast sky that made me feel that way The eyes see what the mind feels

The chariot approached the city limits Not too far away was the Ganga Satyasena passed through the city gates and swerved towards the Ganga Simultaneously a chariot drawn by brownish-grey horses sped in from the west, overtook our chariot and entered the city gates We stared at it Gurudeva Vidura was in it He had been asked by Duryodhana to invite the Pandavas He was probably returning with Draupadi and the Pandavas, because he was sitting alongside the charioteer in the driver's seat Clearly there was a lady inside

The very thought of Draupadi darkened my mind like a cloud-obscured sky She had grievously wounded my esteem by her heartless jibes in the *svayamvara*, which clawed at the roots of my very dignity Ah, how could I have tolerated a female to do this to me! Karna is a warrior, an archer—this had turned out to be a hollow boast Hadn't Time taken the reins of Karna's life by making him a charioteer?

Satyasena was whipping the horses and my mind was whipping my self-esteem

We arrived at the bank of the Ganga I saw the place where I normally stood in the waters for my ritual worship I would return immediately to the *yajna* pavilion after a darshan of the Sun God I had therefore instructed Shon last night to bring the royal vestments and ornaments to the Ganga's bank I had specifically asked

him to have ready the crown that was on my head when I returned from Indraprastha. Standing in the pristine waters of the Ganga, I closed my eyes. No matter how hard I tried, the dazzling rays of light refused to appear before my eyes. I opened my eyes, and saw flock upon flock of *karandava*-birds soaring across the rippling Ganga. My mind seemed to burst with misgivings, as countless as the waves of the Ganga. On the day of the competition, too, the sky had become overcast like this. Was something unforeseen going to happen today too?

I scooped the water in my palms for *anjali*, and with a calm mind waited for the dazzling experience. More than an hour passed but nothing happened. Hundreds of *karandava*-doubts flapped their wings and oppressed my mind.

Satyasena was waiting at the edge of the sandy beach. Frustrated, I decided to return. Emerging from the water, and squelching my way through the sand, I approached him. The end of my wet shawl was trailing in the sand.

"Hasn't Shon yet turned up with the royal vestments?" I asked Satyasena.

"No. But, Maharaja, your ..." He stopped. I looked up at him. He looked despondent. There was fear in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Satyasena?"

Saying nothing, he bowed his head, and started doodling in the sand with the handle of his whip. He definitely wanted to speak, but something held him back.

We waited for Shon. A shrilling sandpiper skittered across to a clump of cacti. Its loud wails resonated in the firmament.

Throwing up clouds of dust, Shon's chariot stopped nearby. He hurried towards us with a huge platter in his hands. Satyasena took the platter from him.

"The first fuel offering must have been made in the *yajna* by now," I said to Shon. I was very curious to know what rituals had been completed in the palace.

"The *yajna*-pavilion is as it was. Instead of fuel-offerings, they are throwing dice. The auspicious time of offering has long since passed." Shon said this as he lifted an arm-ornament from the platter.

"Who are there in the assembly?" I asked, as I wrapped a blue dress round me.

"All of them. So many that there isn't room to stand."

"Who's playing the dice?" I asked as I clenched one end of the dress between my teeth and discarded my wet garment.

"Uncle Shakuni and Yudhishthira. Yudhishthira is not winning a single throw. He staked ten lakhs of cows on the first throw. On the second, the royal wealth of Indraprastha. On the third, the entire kingdom, along with all its male and female attendants." He said this eagerly, while fitting ornaments on my wrist, arms, and neck. Yudhishthira, the great preacher of discipline, prudence, and the difference between dharma and adharma, Yudhishthira, man of conscience—gambling! I could hardly believe what I heard.

"What's happened till now?" I asked, gazing at the Ganga's lapping waters.

"Yudhishthira has lost everything. Bhima is trying to stop him with loud objections. He shouts, and Uncle Shakuni plays. Bhima's shouts make the dice wobble strangely. No one seems to notice this, however." He took the yellow shawl from the platter and draped it around my shoulders. But he had not brought the mysterious crown from Indraprastha that I wanted.

"Why haven't you brought the crown which I wanted from the ornaments-room?"

"I searched high and low, but there was no trace of it in the room."

He had brought along a different crown. He placed it on my head, sat down, and tightly strapped golden sandals on my feet. "Bhaiya, come immediately to the palace. As I was leaving, Yudhishthira had staked himself and his four brothers to twelve years of forest-exile and one year incognito. A terrible thing to do! If he wins, Uncle Shakuni will return all the wealth and the kingdom he has won so far. That is Uncle Shakuni's word. Bhaiya, how could he have staked away all the kingdoms won during the world conquest?"

"Come." I took his arm. In front of my eyes rose a picture of the palace. So it had happened—Uncle Shakuni had contrived to entrap the five Pandavas in four strips of dice-cloth. He had succeeded in smashing the teeth of guffawing Bhima with a throw of the dice. But why did the dice wobble when Bhima shouted? When I threw them, they wobbled too. Why? Like a bull yoked to an oil-press going round and round, my mind went round and round the same perplexing question.

Taking out my ear-ornaments from his waist-cloth, Shon was about to fix them on my ears when he suddenly stopped He lowered his outstretched arm The expression on his face swiftly altered He had the same look that I had noticed earlier on Satyasena's face

"Why, what's the matter, Shon?"

"Bhaiya!" He stopped His brown complexion darkened

"Why are you hesitating?"

"Bhaiya, don't go to the palace today "

"Because if I go and speak out, the dice will wobble the way they do when Bhima shouts and they'll go against the Kauravas "

"No but " Again he broke off

"Why 'but'? Tell me frankly Why shouldn't I go to the palace? ' I shouted, shaking him by the shoulders

"Your flesh-ear-rings are again lustreless today " He lowered his head Then he said, "Like flowers sliced off their stems "

His words slipped like molten iron in my ears I glanced at Satyasena Head bowed, he was still drawing lines in the sand with the butt of his whip Shon had spoken what was in Satyasena's mind

"Shon, lustreless ear-rings or no, broken ear-rings or no, I'm going to the palace today "

"No, bhaiya, don't Gambling is one thing you can never trust " His objection became more vociferous There was nothing but fire in his sharp eyes

"Truth is the one throw that all trust The Pandavas have been overthrown in truth's throw today All their lives they were against Karna Come " I took his hand

"No Bhaiya, please don't go—for my sake, at least " He held my hand tightly How much concern there was in his grip!

'Shon, I don't want advice " I shook off his hand

Pulling the whip from Satyasena's hand, I walked towards the chariot and warned him, "Satyasena, drive Shon back home in his chariot And, Shon, never forget you are Karna's brother " I said this, without looking at Shon

I whipped the horses hard as soon as I climbed into the chariot They galloped ahead furiously My bare arms felt sharply the shimmering waves of heat that rose out of the scorched sands My skin was impenetrable—but it wasn't feelingless it wasn't desensitized

12

Speedily leaving behind the royal thoroughfare as it rushed under an overcast sky, my Jaitra chariot entered the precincts of the palace The gate-keepers were astonished to see me holding the reins, so much so that they forgot even to salute me, they stood there like so many dolls I reined the chariot in, I did have the desire even to drive it inside the chariot-house Flinging the reins on the horses' backs, I leapt down My mind was as anxious to enter the royal assembly as a calf freed of its neck-rope Before setting foot in the pavilion, I cast a last inspecting look at the sky Like the Ganga's waters obscured by dense brown mist, the sky was covered by thick dark clouds all the way up to the horizon on all the four quarters

One had to pass through the *yajna* pavilion in order to reach the palace There was nobody present in that vast enclosure A black crow was futilely pecking for worms in the distant *yajna* pit, it kept twisting its neck this way and that, and cawing intermittently Leaping up the steps four at a time I climbed the palace staircase Many years ago, when I came here from Champanagari, holding the hand of my father, I had tried counting these steps—and the image of that curious step-counting boy Karna rose in front of my eyes Now that same Karna was sure in the knowledge that there were 101 steps in all, because he had gone up and down them any number of times

Ah, how quickly had Fate strung the multi-coloured flowers of events in the seamless thread of Time and prepared my life's garland! It had the pretty buds of childhood, the half-opened petals of my schooldays absorbed in studies, the tinsel of the weapons, exercises and sun-worship of my youth, and and the dried-green leaves of my life's insults, doubts, and neglects—ugly-looking, totally inartistic

My mind began racing even faster than the flow of blood in my body It was obsessed by a single aim the royal assembly, the royal assembly, the royal assembly

I approached the splendid gates of the assembly room, jam-packed with fanatic enthusiasts breathlessly waiting for the results of the dice-game, their eyes riveted on the dice in Uncle Shakuni's palm Seeing Duhshasana like any ordinary person among the male and female attendants, I was astonished His back was to-

wards me Why was he standing near the entrance instead of among the assembly? Everything seemed so topsy turvy

Placing my hand on his back, I said to him, ' How is it that you are standing here today, Duhshasana?" He swivelled like a swift race horse

"Who? Karna? Wait.. just a minute Wait here I have been stationed here since morning by brother to detain you until the dice-game gives over "

"Why? Is my presence inside going to create doomsday? I found his obstruction intolerable No No one among the Kauravas till now dared to obstruct me in this explicit fashion

"I don't know—but I cannot let the Raja of Anga inside the assembly today Uncle is throwing the final dice at this moment The last, all-decisive throw " He spread out both arms in a gesture indicating prevention of my entrance His arms covered the entire gate Why was Duhshasana forgetting my position as the Raja of Anga?

"Tell me, Duhshasana, what are the stakes of this throw?' I asked him, standing on tiptoe and peering inside

"Draupadi " He gripped both sides of the gate and seemed to surround me with his arms

Draupadi—a proud Kshatriya lady, at whose feet Karna had humbly placed the royal vesture of his life—and she had trampled it haughtily as if it were a footmat Countless incidents from my life sped hazily past me like trees and creepers and hills blurring on both sides and receding as one races forward in a swift chariot

"Duhshasana, make way!" I jerked his hands apart I entered, there was a heavy thudding in my head Gambling! Gambling! Gambling may be right or wrong, but who was I to condemn it so long as it brought peace to my insulted, heated mind In any case, had the world in its behaviour with me made any distinction between right and wrong? So I wanted to shout from the entrance itself, "Uncle, you *must* win this throw today!" I pushed my way through the teeming spectators "Stop! Stop!" shouted Duhshasana behind me, with uplifted hand

On the western side of the hall, on a soft mattress spread on a stone platform, with the dice board between them, sat Uncle Shakuni and Yudhishthira Sitting cross legged, Uncle Shakuni lifted his hand to his ear and rattled the dice in the hollow of his fist Behind him, the eyes of Durmukha, Durjaya, Nishangi

Kratha, Alamba, Vatavena and other Kaurava warriors were fixed on his fist On his right sat Duryodhana, staring straight at Bhima Behind Yudhishthira, sat Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, heads lowered in helpless perplexity for the first time in their lives, trying to make sense of the senseless behaviour of their eldest brother Today—yes, today they felt for the first time how near to death a warrior feels when he has to lower his head in front of a large assembly of people How difficult it is in such a predicament to cohere the spreading petals of one's mind-flower

"Play! Play! I choose seven!" Uncle Shakuni shouted, shaking swiftly the dice beside his ear He threw the dice, like a muscular fisherman flinging his net

Are you stopping this dreadful game or not?" Bhima thundered at Yudhishthira even as the dice fell The cowries trembled like straw before crackling thunder I tried to push my way out of the crowd No one in the dice-fascinated assembly had eyes for anything or anyone else All, on tip toe, craned their necks for a better look at the dice Who had won? The burning curiosity in the eyes of all was greater even than the curiosity to watch the feats of competitors in the arena, greater even than the curiosity of people to witness the piercing of the fish-target by the bow of Shiva in Kampilya-nagara It was like the incessant showers that accompany the ascendancy of the constellation of Capricorn Thousands of eyes focused on and around the infamous dice Thousands of lives dragged with them For an instant I thought that life, like a crow that pecks for insects in the *yajna*-pit, pecks for meaning in countless trite and dirty events

"Look, Duryodhana! Seven—and only seven!" Uncle Shakuni slapped Duryodhana's hand and joyfully leapt from his seat All the Kaurava princes clapped loudly My mind split in two and one part beat against the other—thoughts clapping against each other, all topsy-turvy, all dissimilar clapping—sometimes harsh like Duryodhana's voice, sometimes piercing like Uncle Shakuni's, sometimes honey-sweet like the voice of Ashvatthaman, and sometimes stern and didactic like Grandsire Bhishma's Clapping endless, continuous clapping of thoughts—and I, lost in that clapping I could not hear my own voice anywhere There were only claps reverberating on all four sides

I managed to somehow reach the centre seat As I gazed around the hall, it struck me that I had never till now seen such a densely

packed room. The Maharaja was seated on his throne. The pink lids of his closed eyes seemed to be fluttering. Was he getting restless to see the throw of dice? On his left was Maharani Gandhari Devi—her hand constantly moved towards her bandaged eyes. Both Raja and Rani were probably unaware of what was going on in the hall. I thought: *Was this an assembly of sight-blessed people trying to force the sightless Maharaja to see in the dark, or was it a spontaneous outburst of suppressed emotions?*

I could see Grandsire Bhishma, Gurudeva Drona, Kripa, Vidura, Ashvatthaman, the chief minister Vrishavarman, the general and others, along with those who had come from all the ten directions for the satisfactory performance of the *yajna*—Shaunaka, Bhrigu, Chyavana, Kanva, Paila, Yajnavalkya, Susama, Balakhilya, Sahastrapata, Sandipani, Shampaka and other excellent rishis. Not one among them was able to prevent the throw of dice, though the *muhurta* of the yajna had long since elapsed. So Uncle Shakuni's political noose was going to ensnare them all! Shrewd dice-playing skill could pave the way to a complete transformation of the life of the Kauravas. By making the holy men witnesses to the game, Uncle Shakuni established this point once and for all. Uncle Shakuni!—whose gait resembled that of a Gandhara camel—I never saw his gait as straight nor did I interpret it as such. But he had taken the cowries in his fist and proved that in the desert of political intrigue only camels like him survived and flourished. Only crooked walkers showed the way—the camels.

Folding the play-board, smug over his skill, intoxicated by his victory, Uncle Shakuni began muttering, "Yudhishthira, you have lost the kingdom of Indraprastha with all its cattle, wealth, and male and female attendants. You staked and lost and exiled yourself and your four brothers to twelve years in the forest with the thirteenth year to be spent incognito; and just a little while ago you lost your wife on the fall of number seven and made her servant-maid of the Kauravas. You are called the embodiment of Dharma by everybody. Dharma-practising Yudhishthira! Why didn't anyone teach you the dharma of how to win at dice? You have realised at last, haven't you, that there is no one in the whole of Aryavarta who can beat Shakuni in dice-play? Or do you want to stake the only thing you have left—your old mother—in order to test the skill of Shakuni's hands?" Raising his eyebrows repeatedly, Uncle

fee, hadn't he sided with Guru Drona? Why then had Hastinapura made so much of Arjuna? For just one talent—that he was the crown prince of the supreme Kauravas? Because he was a Kshatriya—wasn't that it? Where was all that glorious Kshatriya-hood today?

Supposing he had been in my place? How long could he have endured the terrible psychological anguish and perplexity that arose from intolerable thoughts and feelings of neglect? How long could he have carried on, in spite of bodily well being, talent and dedication, in the constricted circle of a pain-riddled life?

How unbearable experiences are that make up life—it was to teach this lesson that Fate had organised this weird dice-game for the self-important Pandava princes. By this time surely they must have learnt that insult is the black rat that continually chews at the vesture of mind-royalty. Indifference and neglect are storms that vex the serene surface of the talented mind. Scorn is the molten lead that scalds the valiant flesh. Taunts are venomous serpents that slither inside ear-holes. This unendurable side of life—which Karna had suffered all life long—was now the experience of the Pandavas.

As for Draupadi—a mere servant maid! A fragrant servant-maid.

A servant-maid is one who is even lower than a charioteer's daughter. Thought sticks rattled on my mind drum. A servant-maid! A servant-maid with a marriage garland in her hands! The far-seeing servant-maid of blind husbands! The servant-maid-wife of slaves! The dark ashamed face of the servant-maid began a dark circular dance in front of my eyes.

"Maharaja! The princess cannot enter the royal hall." The attendant returned after a round of the ladies' quarters, shuffling and scraping like a broken-winged bird.

"How can that be? A maid does whatever her master wants. She must come."

Duryodhana stood up with the fearsome strength of a stone-belching cannon. What was there in his eyes? Sparks, the *yajna* pit, a flaming volcano.

"No, Maharaja. She is in her period. She has just had her cleansing bath, she has not even done her hair." The attendant said this with bowed head.

"Pratikama! Can't you follow Duryodhana's orders as efficiently as you can drive a chariot? Duhshasana, get up and show this

Pratikama the difference between a Kshatriya and a charioteer Go, and drag her here, as she is " His tone was thunderous.

Duhshasana sped out of the hall like an arrow from a bow. I did not like at all the way Duryodhana belittled Pratikama by comparing him to a charioteer In the excitement of his words, he must have forgotten that his friend Karna was also a charioteer. For an instant I felt like stalking out of the hall, taking the first available chariot and driving back to Champanagari with my parents Mentally, I did in fact stand up—I stood up to go to a place where no one ever demeaned charioteers

"Let me go! Let me go! Don't touch me, you low-caste Chandala!"

Sobbing cries of pain were heard

Duhshasana was trying to enter by the same door by which his world-conquering ancestors had entered

Draupadi, slave maid, her slim fingers clutching through the wedge in the door, her feet digging into the lower part of the door-frame, fought back as if for life itself As if uprooting a fistful of grass, Duhshasana struggled to drag her in But Draupadi's fingers, like lizards, clung on and could not be unfreed Duhshasana suddenly grappled her waist A wave of horror swept over me, in which Karna the charioteer's son, Karna the archer, Karna the Raja of Anga, Karna the respected one—all drowned Only one Karna remained—the Karna who stood in the waters of the Ganga and offered *arghya* to the Sun

"Duhshasana, the arms with which you embraced Draupadi's pure body today in front of all these holy men—I will tear those arms apart and fling them skywards And that arrogance-puffed chest which has made you dishonour my unwell wife in this assembly—I will tear open that chest of yours and guzzle its hot blood like soma-rasa in front of all!" Bhima threw his mace on the ground and made this fierce vow in the presence of all

Someone from within me was roaring out similar sentiments Who? It was Karna, disciple of the Sun, who stood daily on the bank of the Ganga Lifting his hand, he was telling me "Get up, Karna What's happening is unjust Wicked and unjust Rise and stop this injustice Why are you slipping into the womb of darkness from the height of light? Revenge! Retaliation! These are the dirty rags of petty-mindedness Throw them away Rise!"

In an instant an infuriated charioteer, cracking his whip and flexing his reins, appeared in front of the disciple of the Sun. Without any reason, he flicked his whip twice or thrice at the Sun's disciple. Kicking at the *anjali*-offering of Ganga-water, the charioteer thundered: "Have you forgotten your thatch-leaf hut so soon? And the grooming of horses? And the blows of the heart-piercing poisonous word-arrows in the *svayamvara*? Let her realise, let her realise that a servant-maid is lower even than a charioteer."

My mind was caught in the dilemma of choosing between the cascading water of the whiplash-*anjali* and the waterfall of the *arghya*-offering. Puzzled, perplexed, vacillating, it was choked in a smoke-filled atmosphere that blurred all details. Or if the details were visible, they did not make sense. Or if they made sense, they could not be expressed. Who was I? I didn't myself know who I was.

Like a lion dragging an exhausted, half-dead cow to its lair, Duhshasana gripped the waist of that fragrant, dark-skinned, tortured maid and pulled her into the centre-cage of the hall. Like a fish flapping to free itself from a net, she struggled to escape from his clutches.

Duhshasana's arms had not encircled just her, they were strangling the neck of the Sun-disciple within me, slowly but surely suffocating me. The *anjali*-water taken in my palms for the *arghya*-offering spilt into the wobbling vessel of the future as a result of that squeezing grip.

"Pitamaha!" Her single shriek tore through the ceiling.

"Duhshasana! Let us esteem the maid of the Kauravas just a little bit more because she happens to be fragrant—she deserves a higher place than my feet. Make her sit here, on my thigh."

Baring his thigh, Duryodhana slapped it. Grandsire Bhishma lowered his white head.

"Duryodhana! You have in your madness exposed your thigh in public—I will smash it to pulp with a single blow of my mace when the time comes." Bhima made this promise, lifting his mace. His face was puffed and hissing like a snake's head.

"Bhima, no value attaches to the raving vows of a slave."

I could not make out what had happened to Duryodhana. He looked like a blazing torch, belching fire continually.

Again a fierce tussle commenced in me between the charioteer and the Sun-disciple, both mercilessly raining blows at each other. Who could tell who would win?

"Injustice! Injustice on an unwell lady in the presence of respected elders and gurus in a packed hall! Mockery! To mock a woman is to mock chastity. Destruction! To destroy a woman's honour is to destroy goodness and idealism. To assault a woman's honour is to attack the essence of humanity itself. Out of this comes conflict— conflict that annihilates all the gentle feelings of mankind. Karna, Sun-disciple, rise! You are the *yajna*-pit which consumes all enmities. Strike at Duhshasana's hands and shout to one and all that this is unjust, atrocious, demeaning." My inner Sun-disciple, neck veins taut, leapt at the charioteer, and plunged his ray-like sword-fingers in his chest. But the charioteer remained unaffected—his skin was impenetrable.

'Revenge! Retaliation! Insult! Scorn! Mockery! Neglect! Trickery! Such is your life, Karna. Can a living death be called life? You were killed ten years ago by the word-arrows of a woman—how can you today protect any woman? Don't rise, Karna. Whatever's happening is just. The injustice done to you has been revenged in full by unfeeling Time—most cruelly and fiercely. Accept this, Karna. This is the side you should be on." Again the charioteer started whipping me. The Sun-disciple searched for a place to hide, running here and there.

"Revenge! Retaliation! Is it ever honourable for a warrior to take revenge against a woman? Doesn't man's glory lie in protection of woman's honour? Karna, don't let a single moment go to waste. Your silence today will be a permanent blot against your good name. Rise. Step forward. Run and twist Duhshasana's hands. *Arre*, the real man is he who remains firm in adversity." The Sun-disciple concentrated all his energies in the final attempt.

"No. Grandsire Bhishma, Vidura, Drona, Ashvatthaman, Acharya Kripa and others are all present in this assembly. Why then are you the only one to protest? Why should you step forward to play with fire? Supposing Duryodhana angrily gets up and in front of everyone says, 'Son of a charioteer, why do you poke your nose in this business?', and humiliates you as he did Pratikama—what then? And supposing the woman whom you are so eager to save, gets up and declares that she does not wish to be saved by a charioteer's son? That one rebuff will wound you more than a

hundred arrows. So, Karna, don't get up. Don't budge at all."
Finally it was the charioteer who won. Throwing aside his reins in joy, he began whipping the Sun-disciple who was offering *arghya*.

Like a tidal wave buffeting a boat, Duhshasana pushed Draupadi towards Duryodhana, forcibly attempting to make her sit on his bared thigh.

'Wait, Duhshasana! The sons of a blind father are not blind, in fact, they have such clear vision that they can see what the rest of the world cannot. Prove this to this maid. Strip her, and seat her naked on my thigh." Like sparks flying from the clash of hammer on anvil, word-sparks flew out of Duryodhana's mouth. All the rishis clapped their hands to their ears, and closed their eyes.

"Duryodhana!' the Queen Mother Gandhari Devi screamed.

'Duryodhana! You despicable creature! Biting his lips, Bhima dashed forward with uplifted mace, like an infuriated tiger.

Back, Bhima!" Yudhishthira ordered, not lifting his head and remaining absolutely still where he sat gazing at his toe.

Like a conflagration fanning swiftly Duhshasana advanced towards Draupadi. He gripped her right wrist with his left hand as one grips a sword hilt. She thrashed her feet and shrieked in an attempt to free her wrist. How utterly helpless, how vulnerable! In her struggles, the flower garland tying her bee-black tresses snapped and her hair became dishevelled. Dark circles blurred my sight as I watched the spectacle. Where was I? What was happening in front of me? Insult. Barbarity. Iniquity. Was this an assembly of royal Kauravas, or a den of lustful, drunk and stupid people? Ah! Why did I ever come to Hastinapura? Would anything have gone wrong had I continued to grow up as a charioteer in Champanagari? Where was I heading? Towards darkness and downfall and terrible doom. Who had crowned me king? Duryodhana? The populace of Hastinapura? Or blind Fate?

'Throw away that crown, Karna, and make your way from Hastinapura to Champanagari." It was a voice from within me shrieking advice. But... but I was unable to renounce my crown. No matter how intensely one wants to, it is not possible to turn back the tide of time. Nor is it possible to escape the touch of time. Time has to be seen face to face, as it is. One has to live as things happen.

Duhshasana laid hands on the border of Draupadi's upper garment. Reacting like an infuriated serpent, Draupadi bit his hand

sharply He jerked his hands back in pain Like lightning shooting from the sky, she sped away from him She began running in the assembly hall in circles, writhing in anguish Beating her breasts, she wailed

Dark-skinned Draupadi whirled around the assembly like a flaming torch, with Duhshasana storming after her The torch seemed to blaze up brighter until, exhausted, Draupadi collapsed in front of Grandsire Bhishma like a *kaddali*-tree uprooted in a cyclone She beat her head repeatedly on the stone steps, like a window shutter banging against the wall in a fierce storm The auspicious kumkum on her forehead was wiped away, and spurts of blood appeared there Drops of water from her bath-wet hair splattered from her tresses with each assault on her person and mixed with the trickle of blood on the stone steps

I closed my eyes at the unbearable sight But does truth disappear if the eyes are closed? In my shut-yet-awake eyes appeared two drops of blood and two drops of tears For an instant they throbbed and then they mixed and flowed down together, until slowly two huge rivers seemed to emerge—many times vaster than even the Ganga, even more limitless than the Yamuna Their reverberating waves rolled into each other, blood-ripples and tear-ripples, united roaring, boiling I saw numerous heads of warriors floating like lotuses and reeds in that gruesome mix and I was horrified Horrified but not paralysed

'Pitamaha!"

The agony in the shriek made me open my eyes

Her words ignited small explosions of shame "I am Maharaja Pandu's daughter-in-law I am like your own daughter Rise, Pitamaha! Tear apart the hands of this barbarian Chandala! I open my *anchal* in front of you in supplication Don't let my virtue be sold in the ancient assembly hall of the Kauravas Rise! Use your sword to convince this drunk and blind lout that there is such a thing as the Kaurava tradition of protecting the honour of their ladies '

But

But Grandsire Bhishma's head remained drooping like a lotus broken at the stem I had thought that the voice that stood up for me in the tournament would boom forth like the twang of a bowstring—but it failed to do so

Grandsire Bhishma! The ultimate arbiter of the Kuru clan! The extraordinary disciple of the great rishi Vasishtha! The illustrious Kshatriya who learnt his arms-skills from none other than Acharya Shukra and Brihaspati! The dharma-wise mentor who assimilated the tenets of Dharma from none other than Chyavana, Bhargava, and Markandeya! The legitimate son of Maharaja Shantanu and Ganga! The warrior who humbled the Raja of Kashi and Raja Ugrayudha! The archer who defeated Jamadagni's son Parasharuma, from whom he had learnt the science of bowcraft—and proved that "The best disciple is one who betters his guru." The practitioner of the strictest calibacy—a veritable store of disciplined radiance. But

Bhishma was silent, his head bowed.

Why did that eldest of the elders acknowledge this first and only defeat in his life? Does skilful Fate contrive ways of depriving even self respecting adults of their self-respect?

Seeing the Grandsire quiet, Draupadi could hardly believe her eyes. She beat her breasts and screamed, 'Maharaja!" I felt as if her agony would pierce the ceiling and shatter the sky itself. I heard the crackle of thunder in the hollows of my ears. 'Get up, Karna! Rise! You who propitiate the Sun-God for hours on end with *arghya*, rise! Consume this kingdom of darkness! *Arre*, revenge and retaliation are the mean hopes of a fickle mind. They are a swamp of frustrated desires. Are you going to be trapped in that bog like a floundering elephant in quicksand? Karna, you who have delighted in the joys of sun radiance for hours on end every day, today's every second is even more important for your future and everyone's future. Rise! One word from you can alter the entire situation according to your desire."

'Maharaja, stop your unthinking, brutal son! Queen Mother, guard my virtue! I am ready to sweep the assembly hall of the Kauravas as a maid, I am ready to wash your royal clothes, I am ready to dress your hair." She beat her hands on the steps and began wailing again, "Maharaja! Maharani!" The golden bracelets on her wrists were dented by her repeated blows. But but royal justice was not forthcoming.

Swooping like a hawk, Duhshasana caught hold of her dishevelled hair. In noise and tumult resembling the roar of a waterfall, he guffawed, "Slave maid, who are you calling chandala and barbarian? Me?" He pulled hard at her hair. Like the flowers on a

creeper shaking when it is tugged, her head trembled Her jerked head shot a pain up my spine "Why don't you call these eunuch husbands of yours barbarians?" Duhshasana went on loudly laughing

Witnessing these scenes made me horripilate with revulsion—but only for an instant This was the same proud neck of the past which had repeatedly humiliated me—this was that arrogant woman Draupadi

"A woman is the ravishing embodiment of auspicious Shiva-energy " Could thinkers who come up with this profound pronouncement ever imagine that a woman at the right time could be the cause of a massive catastrophe, of horrifying destruction? The one and only cause

With Duhshasana still clutching her hair, she continued addressing every member in the assembly loudly Duhshasana was pulled along behind her She said "Acharya! Gurudeva Drona! Acharya Kripa! Guru-*putra* Ashvatthaman! Noble chief minister! Why are you all silent? Why doesn't even one get up? *Arre*, get up—one at least!"

Each syllable of hers was heart-rending But I was totally unaffected Why should I be affected? My heart had become hard as iron—even more impenetrable than my skin-armour There was nothing in it that could be touched by anyone's pain Why should there be? How could there be?

Beating her breasts, and flailing her arms, and wailing, she dragged herself from one seat to another "O noble men of Hastinapura! Brave warriors who shine on the battlefield! Prestige of the Kauravas! I am a defenceless woman, Draupadi, spreading her *anchal* before you and supplicating for the protection of your strong arms! Rise! Save your unfortunate sister from these wicked hands! O strong heroes born from women's wombs! Can't even a woman's woe waken your masculine vigour?"

One by one she passed the seats and approached me As she spoke, tears trickled down her trembling face and wet her upper garment The next instant she would be in front of my seat and, with arms outstretched, she would say in distress, "Raja of Anga, is there space enough in your invincible, invulnerable skin armour for an unfortunate, defenceless woman to hide her face in? Can your unpiercable skin-armour slice the steel wall of this horrible

atrocity today? Raja of Anga, are you also unable to protect the virtue of Draupadi?"

Enough! Whether friends or enemies, whether I die or not, I shall slice off with a single blow of my sword the merciless, cruel hands that had sullied the purity of Draupadi, who was begging for my help In a second, Karna would no more be a member of the Kaurava assembly The friend who was ready to lay down his life for Duryodhana, would no more be a friend of Duryodhana He would no more be a head-bowed dependent, silently abetting injustice He would not be any more a lonely, unobjecting charioteer, consumed in the *yajna*-pit of insult, no more an insignificant worm agonising for revenge In a second, he would become the disciple of the Sun ready to come to the aid of a woman seeking his help A real man!

I collected the loose strings of my mind firmly together Karna the charioteer's son, Karna the Kaurava warrior, humiliated Karna, shuddering-with-revenge Karna I tied them tightly together and flung them in a corner of my body The Sun-disciple in me, racing his countless sunray horses, ready to face any challenge, stood in front of me It would be a grisly drama indeed that would be enacted an instant from now Even if the entire Kaurava assembly rose as one against Karna, they would not be able to harm a single hair of Draupadi who stood behind me Karna would no more have the shallow pride of heroically protecting a powerless woman He would no longer have the feeling that he was being condescending to the Pandavas He would not have have any desire to show off his valiant manhood Only the promise of protecting a helpless human would remain—only that promise "Karna, save my virtue!" If even the most ordinary female of Hastinapura sought my help in distress, I would at any time and under any condition grant her this same promise And here was Draupadi herself! I was ready to save her even at the risk of my life With one hand raised, and the other pushing Duhshasana away from her, she made her pitiful way along the seats Like a deodar trunk floating in the mighty river of doomsday, Duhshasana was dragged by her as he hung on to her feet-length hair She was only a woman, but even a veteran warrior of duels like Duhshasana was unable to overcome her This was an unendurable mockery of Duhshasana's manhood Boiling with rage, he twisted her hair round his neck and jerked Draupadi's neck

furiously again and again He was doing his vicious best to hurt her Perhaps he saw nothing in the assembly except Draupadi—nor did he hear anything else

Pausing before Urnanabha, Chitrachapa, Dridhavarman, Nishangin, Mahabahu, Vishalaksha, Chitravarman, Somakirti and others, she appealed to their chivalry in the most piteous tone, like a cow that has lost her way in a jungle in a storm No one rose.

She appealed piteously to Prince Padmanabha who was sitting on my right "Prince Padmanabha!" The wails of that helpless woman were more piercing than the victory acclamations of thousands of spectators who shouted praise for me and Prince Arjuna in the arena But Padmanabha did not so much as raise his head

The next moment she stood in front of me Her eyes brimmed with tears My life had experienced many such unforgettable incidents which had transformed my life extraordinarily My life was a tapestry of such incidents And this incident was the most significant of them all, the most impressive Suddenly my flesh-earrings quivered Not because she stood helpless before me She was about to appeal to me, and what would happen then—I myself did not know I was ready to jump from the seat into the centre of the hall

She glanced briefly at me Her eyes did not have the least Kshatriyan self-importance I felt this—but only for an instant I stood up, my hand on my sword hilt A single phrase would escape from her lips "Raja of Anga!" The next instant I would deal with Duhshasana as I dealt with Jarasandha Seeing me rise, Grandsire Bhishma, the chief minister, Ashvatthaman, Acharya Kripa, and Guru Drona lifted their heads in surprise My blood was surging, soaring, like a flock of *saranga*-birds My body was aflame, like a stone heated on the sands of the Ganga during summer In my ears I could hear a mysterious whistle, like the peal of a conch I prepared my ears to hear that one phrase But but she passed me by, without uttering a single word, yet sobbing, I don't know why I felt as if a thousand lightnings had struck my head Why had she passed me by? What was she feeling? Did she feel that it was wrong for a Kshatriya lady to beg for help from a charioteer's son? Again, countless serpents of questions raised their hoods in the cave of my mind Stormy horses of thoughts raced through my head Under their hooves, discipline, conscience, generosity, sympathy and all the noblest virtues of mankind spilt their blood

on my tortured body, which seemed on the verge of death I wanted to shut my ears with my palms and scream to her with throat-tearing vociferousness, so loudly that the noise would shatter even my impenetrable skin-armour, "I am not a charioteer's son I am the Raja of Anga " The sword-hilt trembled in my hand I could not stand any more I fell on my seat Mind, body, consciousness—all were numb Why did Fate forget to provide an impenetrable-skin warrior with an impenetrable mind?

At her *svayamvara* she tattered my self-esteem with bitter words and now today by not saying anything she flung those tatters into the dust. What was I to her except a bull squatting in that assembly hall—I, Karna, who wore royal robes and sported a crown on my head? So she thought it more demeaning to plead for help before the Raja of Anga than before the most ordinary of rajas? Or was she trying to hint that there was no difference between Karna and Pratikama? Like a herd of elephants caught in a forest fire, trumpeting and cannoning into each other, herds of thoughts clashed in my mind Afraid that the collision of thoughts and doubts would burst my head apart, I held it hard between both hands

The insulted, panting, and wild-haired slave maid was dragged away by Duhshasana, using all his strength, from the seats to the centre of the hall Slave maid—slave maid, indeed She was the slave maid of all the Kaurava princes The dice game had made that very clear But for me she had fallen even lower than a slave The realities of life had made sure of that

Wailing loudly, she was pinpointing blame on the assembly and on each of her husbands To prevent Duhshasana's hands touching her upper garment, stooping, she had bundled up her body I do not know how others were touched by her poignant words, but I was completely unaffected What reason was there for me to be affected? Charioteers have no ears—and no feelings either If they do, they are made of stone and laid out in the dust, to be kicked at will by anyone who so wishes

She kept circling the same place again and again, trying her last despe ate efforts to free herself, and shouting whatever came to her mind, like the crack of lightning "Tell me is there a single truth-loving, brave hero with a lion-like heart left in this ancient hall of the Kauravas? There is no assembly without elders, elders are not elders if they lack the dharma to condemn adharma, and

furiously again and again He was doing his vicious best to hurt her Perhaps he saw nothing in the assembly except Draupadi—nor did he hear anything else

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so-called elders: 'Have your swords that once shone in battle all rusted today?' Grandsire Bhishma, the Maharaja, Acharya Drona, the Gurudeva, the chief minister, Acharya Kripa and all these wisdom-dispensing hermits and Brahma-knowing rishis—why are you silent today like so many ghosts? Has lightning fallen on you, or what? I am Prince Vikarna, and I declare that the sobbing and wailing of a married lady, and her throbbing tears that carry with them the terrifying doom-music of her pain and lamentation, will assume the form of a thundering, massive tidal wave of the Ganga and sweep away all the seats and thrones, greed for which makes you so silent today. To molest a faithful wife means just that—to molest a faithful wife—and to molest a faithful wife is the death of male chivalry." He surveyed the assembly with a penetrating gaze, and his words poured like torrential rain during the ascendancy of the Deer Constellation.

He was the only one to speak out in that assembly. I felt proud of him. But it was only for a moment. Was his goodness based on fact? Who was he describing as a "faithful wife"? He had cited the examples of Tapati, Viraja, Sudakshina, Devayani and other remarkable Maharanis, but was this Draupadi worthy even of sitting at their feet? Had she not defied all social conventions and given her body for enjoyment to five husbands? Which of the earlier Maharanis had taken more than one husband and set such a precedent of married life in Hastinapura? Had any of them mocked the physical defects of any of their relatives? Which of them had kicked a hero and called him "Lowcaste! Lowcaste!" while simultaneously flying the flag of family honour? Draupadi could not be described as a "faithful wife". She was a courtesan, an adulteress, an unchaste woman. Like a poisonous snake hissing, the charioteer inside me rose in fury. "Wait, Karna!" He placed his foot on the head of the Sun-disciple who was speaking and blindly hissed:

"Vikarna, you are a fool. Grandsire Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Acharya Drona, and the chief minister are all present in the assembly. They have not raised any objection. In spite of that, you are shouting yourself hoarse in the belief that the mantle of dharma has fallen entirely on you. The woman whom you are so vehemently defending a 'faithful wife' is not as faithful as you think. She revels in physical enjoyment of five husbands. She is unchaste! She is an adulteress! She is a harlot! Why five—

dharma that cannot distinguish between truth and untruth is not dharma at all Will anyone explain to me whether a husband who has staked himself and lost, has the right to stake his wife? Dharmaraja is my husband's title—let him explain to all present here what dharma gave him the right to stake me after he had lost himself

"Each of you seated here is a tiger among men who respects women highly and, to protect their honour, is ready to let rivers of blood flow Even the lifeless wood stumps of your seats will tell you that a woman's honour is not something that can be gambled away on a dice-board A woman's honour is not dice to be flung at one's whim The hand that molests a woman is destined to become the doom of society and kingdom Have you forgotten that each of you was born from a woman's womb? Tell me, is there any splendid son here alive who has not been suckled by a mother?"

A death-like silence fell on the hall for an instant Duhshasana's fist unclenched

Like a fish flapping out of a shoal in a still pond, Duryodhana's brother Vikarna rose Lifting his hand, he said authoritatively to his elder brother Duhshasana, "Duhshasana, don't you dare touch Draupadi! Let all recall that this royal assembly has been graced by such queens as Tapati, Nalini, Bhumini, Sudakshina, Viraja, Devayani, Ganga, and Satyavati To insult a royal lady here is to trample underfoot the deity in the temple itself The husband who has lost himself has no right to stake his wife A royal administration built on injustice cannot last long in the eyes of society and the world You foolish and blind assembly members! Can't you see that injustice is being perpetrated in a hall of heroes against an unwell lady dressed in a single cloth? You are the descendants of Maharajas Ayu, Nahusha, Yayati, Puru, Hastin, Ajamidha, Samvarana, Kuru, Jahnu, Pratipa and Shantanu—have you all forgotten that fact? Tell me, has this assembly hall ever in the past witnessed such a heinous sight? This is the hall that deliberated on the Himalaya-profound decisions relating to world-conquests and Ashvamedha-*yajna*—and today in that very same hall a defenceless woman stands sobbing in humiliation, seeking to save her honour And that lady happens to be a daughter-in-law of the Kauravas! Blessed must be these Kauravas and blessed their throne—and blessed these warriors!

"I am young in years, but I ask this question direct to my

less. Slice off the heads of all these silent so-called civilised people with the cutting teeth of your all-destroying discus Sudarshana Krishna! Do you have any respect at all for motherhood—for Yashoda and Devaki? Do you have any of the illustrious Vrishni respect for honour left in you—you who bow your head before the massive portals of the temple of motherhood? If you are really interested in dissolving this universe in a massive doom-darkness, then blow out the huge lamp of the sun with a single puff, and sink this dark-skinned slave girl of the Kauravas in that total darkness. Or run! Come running on the thundering waves of the Yamuna! Come like a shrieking cyclone! Come out of the blue vastness of the sky, out of the bowels of the nether world, out of the ten directions! Run and come! Save me!"

She beat her breasts passionately.

My flesh-ear-rings vibrated to her heart-rending cries. For the first time my pure pillar-like golden skin-armoured body horripilated. In front of my eyes opened a vast ocean of blackness, and my head bobbed like a reed in its buffeting hill-high waves. My legs wobbled. The buffeting did not stop. Under their ceaseless impact my flesh-ear-rings snapped and floated away to a swampy edge where I clearly saw them lying.

To Duhshasana, who was like an ocean storm, the lamentations of Draupadi were like the screams of a sea-bird and he probably did not even hear them. Like an impatient storm trying to uproot a plantain tree, he started tugging swiftly at the *anchal*. Covering her face with both her hands, that dark-skinned lady spun like a whirlpool. Only two wraps of her dress remained on her body. My mind agonised in its own helplessness, as if it had been pushed down the highest Himalayan peak. Someone was jabbing my body with a trident. A horrible thought-scorpion stung my body. Vrishali was standing in the hall in place of Draupadi. Like a thatch-leaf hut collapsing in a torrential downpour, I willynilly fell on my seat. There was no strength in my legs. The revenge, anger, bitterness, and feeling of retaliation of a minute ago were barriers that broke down completely. What had I said? For whom? To whom?

I ran here and there with eyes closed seeking to hide in a corner of my heart. But Vrishali continued to follow me. Vrishali! Yes, Vrishali herself. Vrishali hounding me. Defenceless, unwell Vrishali emerging from her purificatory bath. Hair all dishevelled

she is the kind of woman who lusts for one hundred and five husbands A maid has at least modesty to cover her body She is at least humble But an adulteress doesn't have these qualities What does it matter, Duhshasana, if she comes dressed or undressed in the hall? How can a shameless adulteress have any shame to lose? Don't poke your nose, Vikarna, in things you know nothing about Sit down Duhshasana, unsheathe the dark sword Draupadi from the scabbard of her clothes She has been dangling all this while on the hips of the impotent Pandavas "

Like the shrieking of a flock of parrots fluttering out of their tree-holes, these words emerged from my mouth— scattering in a flurry of green feathers I spoke to my heart's content, like one intoxicated I lifted the plate of my years-long neglect, filled with the flaming embers of revenge, and emptied it on Draupadi's proud head This was revenge indeed

Revenge is not an action, it is a reaction When two proud personalities clash, a chain reaction starts The world describes it as revenge, or cruelty

It seemed as if Duhshasana was actually waiting to hear what was said Duhshasana caught hold of the end of Draupadi's *anchal* and pulled it, as if peeling a plaintain Covering her breasts with her arms, she screamed, "O Achyuta, Milinda, Madhava, Keshava, Gopala, Gudakesha, Ghanashyama, help me! O Sri Krishna, Madhusudana, become the earth and open a hole for unfortunate Draupadi to be swallowed up! Become the fire in a *yajna*-pit and consume *yajna* born Draupadi in it! Take her hot ashy remains and smear them on the faces of these blind, vile criminals! Duck the drunk heads of these lust seekers in the tidal waves of the Yamuna created by my helpless tears—until they drown to death! Scorch with ray-hot sighs these poisonous snakes lurking in the thick jungles of the Kaurava clan O Keshava, destroyer of Kansa! Slicer of Shishupala's throat, Krishna! Lifter of Govardhana, Gopala! Decapitater of Shatadhanva, Shyamasundara! Vasudeva, who made Viduratha senseless! Lord of Dvarika, who burnt Dantavakra to cinders! Nandakishora, who wiped out the anti-god Naraka! Lord of space, who mangled the arms of the anti-god Bana! Purushottama, who humbled Paundraka! Shashikishora, who killed Shalva and Shrigala! Help me! Grant me shelter in the hollow space in your flute that is vast enough to contain the three worlds—I am Draupadi, helpless, defenceless, alone, husband-

ears with their hands Duhshasana, furious as a maddened elephant, saw Vikarna clapping in joy and became even more infuriated What would have happened had anyone tried at that moment to obstruct Duhshasana? He was in no mood to listen to anyone He would have stripped that person then and there Duryodhana had fanned to flame the embers of Duhshasana's conscienceless mind Stirred by my detestable words, he had become a raging fire—a conflagration that could not be quenched now by Duryodhana, nor by me, nor even by any royal Kaurava order

The hall piled up with a heap of upper garments, and my mind with countless thoughts What had I gone and done? I had gone and in the black pit of revenge heedlessly drowned the purity of my character attained from childhood onwards through rigorous routine and strict dedication Karna! Lauded by all warriors! Karna, who transformed chaos to order by dint of patience! Karna, who ruled the hearts of all the citizens with threads of affection! In an instant, he had become an unfortunate denizen in the kingdom of emotions Shishupala and I, Duhshasana and I, and also Kansa and I—was there no difference between the two? Thinking this, tears came to my eyes, the first tears of my life There was no compassion in them, no awe, no yearning, nor was there a feeling of remorse shuddering at the fear of consequences There was only a pulsing wave of pain and anguish which crashed through the immense barrier of my mind as it searched for the figure of the Sun-disciple Karna in the pile of upper garments—the same Sun-disciple who had all his life cherished idealistic principles That agony found shape in the form of tear-drops in the eyes of Karna the charioteer's son Tears in the eyes of the charioteer's son for the Sun disciple! For a moment I thought *Had I not been the son of a charioteer what would have been the course of my life then? Like Sri Krishna's? Why not? It was entirely possible* Even ordinary becomes extraordinary with good samskaras Without them even lotus-petals get dirtied in the slime of wicked deeds More important than the impression one *gives*, is what one should *be* If this is not possible, then at least one should ensure what one should *be* In a flash I had destroyed everything

My first tears slipped out in the royal assembly of the Kauravas and lost themselves in my shawl No one noticed them Draupadi stood in front of my eyes Sweat-drenched, exhausted Duhsha-

Wailing Vrishali, covering her face with both her hands Stripped Vrishali, shrieking, "Raja of Anga! Raja of Anga!" Seeing Vrishali in place of Draupadi, I immediately opened my eyes Even before my wide-open eyes I saw Draupadi one instant and Vrishali the other Draupadi! Vrishali! Stripped Draupadi! Ah, stripped Vrishali! Vrishali! Ah, she should be covered up

Picking up my shawl, I rose again from my seat In the meantime, the fearful sounds of a flute entered the assembly hall from some unknown place, like a victorious army pressing forward to wipe out the remnants of its routed enemies And immediately the heart piercing tumult of thousands of musical instruments was heard I recalled the Rajasuya Yajna I was unable to make out what was going on My mind was not working The noise made everyone tremble Where were these sounds coming from? The sky? The nether world? Or from the ten directions? No one could tell A beam of light streamed through one of the openings in the pavilion ceiling intended to let sunlight filter in and spread itself on Draupadi's entire body I instantly recalled the Sudarshana chakra I could see in front of my eyes the blue-complexioned figure of Sri Krishna What will happen now? Will Duhshasana become another Shishupala? And me as well? The cacophony of the instruments instilled terror in all hearts But Duhshasana's frenzy swelled Ignoring everyone, he started pulling at her garment as if he was tugging at a horse's reins Like a straw swirling in a whirlpool, she spun with the cloth The whole assembly was shocked Draupadi had another blood-red upper garment on her body, which seemed to be woven into her blue-coloured upper garment Fearful of defeat, Duhshasana's eyes were blood-red The noise of the instruments increased every instant, yet Duhshasana dared to grip that blood-red dress

Who am I? Who is Draupadi? This is the assembly of the Kauravas Forgetting all this, I stared dumbfounded at that extraordinary, weird, profound spectacle My hand, which held the shawl, started trembling What had I done today? Where had I lost myself? What had I said?

Srrrrrr-srrrrr! Swifter than even a sword, Duhshasana began pulling at her upper garment But like a herd of cows grazing each other as they hurry from their cowpen to the forest, blue, green, purple, white and red upper garments appeared one by one in a stream The shrilling of the instruments forced many to shut their

As soon as they left the hall, Grandsire Bhishma unsheathed the sword hanging at his waist Transfixed on my seat like a stone statue, I was trying to make out what kind of daybreak would emerge after such a cloud-shadowed day What had today been except an amalgam of surprise, confusion, mystery, felony, downfall, folly, cruelty, and unscrupulousness? But, seeing the sharp sword in Grandsire Bhishma's hand, I trembled at the prospect of another assault What was going on in his mind? I was not so stunned by the eye-boggling drama of a little while ago as I was by the sight of the glinting sword in the grasp of that palmtree-tall old man What was he planning? What more was there to see?

Bending his right leg, he sat down near the heap of dresses Placing his hand gently on Draupadi's back, he said, "Draupadi" The pile shook but she remained as if senseless Grandsire Bhishma lifted a corner of the yellow dress and, with his sword, cut off the skyblue upper garment which was joined to the yellow He had warned Duhshasana not to lay hands on the yellow cloth, and this was the very cloth that he sliced with complete ease How was he able to do this?

Grandsire Bhishma rose and signalled Maids stepped forward and picked up the senseless Draupadi The Pandavas were standing around with lowered heads The Grandsire placed one hand on Arjuna's back and the other on Bhima's, and slowly patted them At a nod of his head, the five Pandavas accompanied Grandsire Bhishma, who still had his hands on the backs of Bhima and Arjuna

I had no desire to get up from my seat I felt as if someone had made a stone pyramid of the heap of clothes and placed it on my chest—and I felt suffocated I do not remember how long I sat in that condition I hurriedly rose when the empty seats of the hall glowed fiercely in the dust-dimmed light of the setting sun The attendants forgot to light up the lamps Anyway, no light was enough to drive away the darkness that surrounded me

For some time I felt as if I had just woken up from deep sleep Upset I walked warily towards the door to leave the hall Seeing the pile of multi coloured clothes, I felt that my life was also like them But, there was not one cloth in it resembling the radiant, dazzling yellow garment

Reaching the main door, I looked back—to see what vestiges were left of today's incidents in the grand assembly hall which had

sana paused momentarily He was panting like a horse after a hundred-*yojana* journey The heap of upper garments towered above them both The din of the instruments suddenly ceased and only the fear-instilling sound of the flute pierced the atmosphere The yellow upper garment on Draupadi's body dazzled, like a vesture of gold threads I had the feeling that I had seen this before Gathering all his energies, Duhshasana laid his hands on the yellow upper garment Throwing his hands like the front hooves of a leaping white horse, Grandsire Bhishma jumped from his seat and boomed, "Duhshasana, not an inch more! You will be reduced to ashes, as Shishupala was Remember this is Krishna's yellow garment!"

Exhausted Duhshasana lowered his hands and staggered to his seat Placing his hands on the seat-arms, he stooped From his sweat-drenched head, two drops fell on the seat, and he dropped on them with a thud, utterly bereft of strength Drops of sweat on the seat, Duhshasana on the drops of sweat! I averted my face in disgust My shawl had long since fallen from my hands, it looked so colourless next to the radiance of the yellow upper garment I sat down in dejection

Draupadi's head was swimming after being pulled round and round Like the flower of the thorn-bush *katasaraiya* swinging to the touch of the breeze, she swayed for a moment, and then like a plantain tree she toppled unconscious on the heap of upper garments In her yellow dress, she looked like forked lightning flashing through that rainbow pile of multi-coloured garments Some spectators stepped forward to take the dust of her exposed feet, but in the meantime, taking advantage of the silence, Grandsire Bhishma jumped down and hurried towards Draupadi like Garuda swooping from a mountain top, and they stood stock-still Approaching Draupadi, Grandsire Bhishma addressed them gravely, Members of the assembly! The dice game is over You can leave But keep in mind that the gambling with events has begun " Heads bowed, they departed one by one

My slipped shawl came under the feet of Vikarna as the princes were leaving for their respective palaces The yellow garment was on Draupadi's body but my shawl was under Vikarna's feet I felt numb Trampling my shawl, and ignoring Grandsire Bhishma, Vikarna took the dust of unconscious Draupadi's feet and put it on his head Only Vikarna did so

bones—the same Jarasandha whom Bhima killed, and whose life you spared "

"What are you saying, Shon! Did Duhshasana go to Magadha to get Jarasandha's bones?" I shook his shoulders

"Yes The cowries shake at the very sound of your voice That is why they cleverly contrived to keep you out of the hall till the gambling ended The cowries shake at your presence—and Bhima's "

"How did you find all this out?"

"From Satyasena Satyasena knew from the very beginning that Duryodhana would have you despatched to the Ganga's bank "

What a web of mystery today was!

"Go, Shon. But but remember—don't hold anything against me for being rough with you this morning The whole world may turn against me—and I won't care But you are my brother We are both flesh-and-blood of the same mother Never forget that "

"Bhaiya, even if I have to meet death in your presence, I will accept it gladly—just as I used to lovingly gather seashells on the Ganga's bank " He stepped forward and touched my feet

I pointed to veiled Meghamala standing near the temple sanctuary, and said, "Go, Shon Tell her the *alpana* has been wiped out That is what happens to *alpanas* "

Slowly he left

For the first time I felt ashamed of myself when I saw Vrishali sitting near the entrance of the bedroom She would needle me with all kinds of questions about the unpleasant incidents in the assembly hall What would I say to her? What must she be thinking of her husband's behaviour today?

I entered, as if I had not even noticed her, I walked to the window and stared at the invisible darkness shrouded Ganga outside

As she did always, she came and stood next to me, and said, in a surprised voice, "*Arre*, where is your shawl? Did you give it to someone?"

"Yes, I wanted to, but I couldn't But why are you questioning me about a small thing like a shawl?"

"Small? No, no It was a shawl filled with memories I had picked it up from the Ganga, like a silly girl It was dear to both of us Where is it?"

"Gone Gone for good It has gone for good, after showing me

been witness to so many glorious events The golden throne, as high as an adult man, was lustreless in the dark hall The empty seats looked like so many scattered black stone slabs on a river bank There was someone in the hall, slumped as if lifeless on a seat in the far distance, with his head between his knees From the position of the seat I could make out it was Duhshasana Why should anyone else be there? He was so still that there seemed to be no difference between him and the pile of clothes Heaving a sigh, I left the hall I did not have the desire to go, as was my practice, to the Ganga to offer my evening *arghya*-prayers The entire western sky was obscured by thick black clouds

My feet felt as if they were clamped down by heavy chains I climbed the palace staircase and reached the portals In the central sanctuary of the Vishnu temple Meghamala was bending and pouring *ingudi* oil in the stone lamps, which she lit as soon as they were full Her *ketaki* flower face glowed in the light of the lamps I recalled her carelessness that morning when she dropped the *alpana* platter I hurried my steps and stood in front of the sanctuary Seeing me, Meghamala moved back I lifted a stone lamp and by its light inspected the floor where the *alpana* had scattered The white *alpana* had dispersed and faded, so had the yellow turmeric What remained were the blood-red lines of kumkum, slightly smudged I smiled wearily and ran my fingers on the red smeared kumkum It felt very strange I handed the stone lamp to Meghamala and strode straight to the sleeping quarters

Shon suddenly materialised in front of me I wanted to hug him tightly and, like the Vasu of childhood days, ask him, "Shon, who am I?" But hadn't I roughly shaken off his loving hand early this morning on the bank of the Ganga? Saying nothing to him, I turned to the sleeping room, but he approached me by himself and said, "Bhaiya, wait " He was my own brother, after all In spite of being an elder, I had to listen to his advice quietly I stopped

"Bhaiya, why did everyone ask you to offer *arghya*- prayers this morning? Have you found out or no?"

"Shon, even if I had found out, it would not help "

"But you should know what people think about you, especially those for whom you are willing to stake all your life's ideals "

"Very well, you tell me why was I pressed to go to the Ganga this morning?"

"The dice used today in the gambling were made of Jarasandha's

"What strange story did she tell you?"

"You accompanied all the others once to the Rajasuya Yajna in Indraprastha At that time Draupadi from the staircase saw your face with its flesh-ear-rings reflected in the pool of the magic room, and whispered in its ear "

"What did she say? Tell me, Vrishali I was in the dark then, and I am still in the dark "

"She whispered, 'Hiranmayi, had I become the wife of these flesh-ear-rings and armour, what springs would have blossomed in the garden of my life! If Karna, the Raja of Anga, had been my husband, the year that I bitterly had to divide between my five husbands, living two months with each brother, would not have been thus divided '" Saying this, Vrishali placed her head on my back I turned and sighing, "Draupadi!", I cupped Vrishali's face in my hands, my splendour was dimmed, and I was agonising inside

"Not Draupadi! I am Vrishali!" Placing her hands on mine, Vrishali said, "At least your worrying mind will now no more misunderstand Draupadi " She looked deep in my eyes in the flickering faint light of the lamp, as if to discover something

Mixed feelings made my mind restless From early morning I had been tossed between truth and untruth, and by some super-natural power I had been diverted from truth and flung towards untruth What was the point now in seeking truth? In knowing what Draupadi's feelings had been?

"Vrishali!" I murmured, embracing her

"How splendid you are! Draupadi must be so jealous of me!' Vrishali said, snuggling her face in my chest

"I—splendid? Vrishali, I was splendid once Now now "

"For me you will always remain splendid " Freeing herself, she moved gracefully out of the bedroom Thinking she was going to get something for me, I said, "I don't need anything, Vrishali I am not hungry "

No sooner had she left than I swiftly shut the door and flung myself on the bed The enthusiasm of my body and my mind waned Like a sea-bird flapping across the waves in search of an endless horizon, my mind leapt out with full vigour, seeking its future, and, unable to discover the limits, returned to its body-cage and, panting, with wide-open beak, gave up in desperation crying in agony, "Forgive me, Draupadi Draupadi, forgive me "

that there are many vestures in this world far more precious than that shawl "

"In that case, good it's gone The best vesture for a wife is her husband " Rubbing her cheek on my back, she said this with her usual loving respect

So she knew nothing at all of what had transpired in the assembly hall I sighed freely

"That's a strange story you have told me of the disappearance of your shawl I am going to surprise you with an even more astonishing piece of news " I could hear her, but in my mind there was only the assembly hall whirling red, blue, green, yellow colours

"What news?" I asked, moving away from her and standing before another window

"You never tire of repeating that Draupadi makes fun of you, but "

'Vrishali, I don't want to hear anything more about this I won't allow anyone judging what I did, like spectators on a bank judging swimmers "

"But please listen Draupadi has never made fun of you in her heart of heart," she interrupted me

"How can you possibly say this?"

"I discovered today "

"What?

"We were all sitting together in the inner ladies' apartments in the afternoon Draupadi arrived then, after her bath Because I happen to be your wife, she made special gestures of politeness to me She touched Vrishasena's ears and went so far as to say, 'Really, I wonder why your son does not have flesh-ear-rings ' What reply could I give? I avoided the question with, 'Only his father knows ' But as soon as I mentioned you, she lowered her head '

"Why do you think she did that, Vrishali? Oh, you will never understand why " I gazed out with sight-shafts deep into the distant darkness and said this

"I also had the feeling that she would make fun of you to me That is why, when she turned towards the mirror to do her hair, I summoned her maid Hiranmayi in order to find out the truth What she told me is what makes me say all this I wanted to tell you everything as soon as possible and remove the doubt in your mind I asked Mrinal to look for you, but you were involved with the assembly hall "

husband, obedient to his mother's wish, agrees to make her the common wife of his brothers as well, when all she has done is obeyed her eldest husband? Tell me. am I a loose woman, a pleasure-seeker, a harlot? Look deep in yourself, and answer me."

The light grew more and more intense. I shaded my eyes and shouted, "No, Draupadi, you are not unchaste. You are a faithful wife, as pure as Vrishali."

Profound darkness outside—but I stood up and, leaving the bedroom and palace behind, I climbed down the stairs and came to the main gate of the palace boundary. Without waking the sentries, I undid the bolt, opened the door and moved in the direction of the Ganga. The darkness seemed to have swallowed all of Hastinapura. The only way I could make out the path was because I was already familiar with it.

I sat down on my usual spot on the Ganga's bank. Occasionally I could hear the shrieks of a flapping *karandava*-bird on one of the kadamba trees in the thick cluster. But the next instant its shrieks disappeared and mysteriously became inaudible in that vast silence of the place. The blue *parijata* tree of the sky was populated with thick clusters of star-flowers, some of which were scattered in reflections on the Ganga's waters. I sat on the stone for a long time. But I had no answer to my problem of when my inner confusion and chaos would end. The lapping waves would never be able to provide an answer. With a bitter mind, I left the Ganga's bank and returned to the palace. I don't know when my tortured self found solace in sleep. Sleep is the most loving mother of all. She calms the multitudinous sufferings of all in her vast goodness—briefly, yes, but perfectly and surely.

13

Awakened by a knocking sound, I saw with wonder the enchanting rays of the morning sun streaming in from the bedroom window. I don't recall having ever slept so late. Had yesterday's events changed my day's routine also? With this doubt, I leapt from my bed and looked out of the window, and saw how high up in the sky the sun had climbed. Again that knocking on the door. I knew it could not be Vrishali, or Supriya, or Meghamala. And Satyasena and Shon would never come to my bedroom. It could be only Radha-mata. Still in doubt, I unlatched the door. Seeing

Such thoughts on a soft bed make a person even more restless and uneasy So I knelt on the ice-cold floor and rested my head on the bed But in an instant the entire day blazed like the rays of the sun in front of my eyes The eyes of one's body can be closed, but how does one shut the eyes of the mind? The multicoloured wings of varied incidents flapped in front of my mind's eyes, shrieking off and on, "Cloud-obscured sky! The *alpana* salver! A screeching sandpiper! Lustreless flesh-ear-rings! A crow perched on a *yajna*-pit! Black, jet-black day! Draupadi's dishevelled black hair, tears, and blood-drops! Ah, rivers of tears and blood! Shaking cowries! Duhshasana like a rutting elephant! And and conscienceless, pathless, half-fallen Karna! Wailing, agony and injustice all around! Total bewilderment! Shining yellow garment—the *pitambara*! And and the upper garment trampled underfoot! The white powder of the splattered *alpana*! The remainder of the kumkum vermilion! Blood-red, thick kumkum! Shon placing his head at my feet! Vrishali placing her head at my back! Draupadi eager to divide the year into two-monthly portions! Draupadi! Draupadi! '

I raised my head helplessly The stone lamps were flickering on all sides Rotten food offered to a famished man is sure to drive him insane To remove my mind's painful darkness I stared at a stone lamp Draupadi was there, in that shining light She was speaking to me, with deep tenderness, "Raja of Anga, you must have been hurt by the fact that I did not appeal to you for help today You must have been shattered by the thought that Draupadi spurned you again But but the truth is—with what face could I have asked for your help today? What right had I? Hadn t I in the pride of my fragrant body spurned shining flesh-ear-rings? It took me a long time to realise that your flesh ear-rings and skin-armour were just as precious as my fragrant body And by the time this dawned on me, I had no choice left I did insult you If, with the memory of that pain in my heart, I begged you for help in the assembly and you turned your face away, what then?—how would I ever have been able to live down that contempt? Which is the exact reason why my shame prevented me from approaching you I didn't mean to mock you, my aim was not to insult you, but but you did brand me unchaste, you described me as a harlot, and you labelled me an adulteress who sported with five husbands Tell me how can a wife be branded harlot when her

"A dent A deep dent which his right toe made when he pressed it hard in order to stop Bhima."

"A dent made by his toe?"

"Yes Because of Yudhishthira's passivity the Queen Mother Kunti Devi told his younger brothers to decide matters only after looking at his toe If the toe is raised, only then are all four brothers free to retaliate "

"So what was the reason he didn't raise his toe yesterday?" This mystery made me very restless

"Had he done so, he would have fallen in his own estimation forever One can't even imagine what could have happened On top of that, he would have lost the trust of his mother

"What are you getting at? You think the four would have finished off the whole lot of them?"

"No, not that, but Bhima would certainly have killed Duhshasana, because in his anger he did succeed in twisting out of shape the iron arm-rest of his seat You can go and see that for yourself in the hall "

"Ashvatthaman, don't you hate me after all the horrible things that happened yesterday?"

"Of course not Yes, one thing really hurt me '

"What? My branding Draupadi a harlot?

"No If you hadn't said that, how would anyone in Hastinapura ever have known how exceptional a lady Draupadi is? Today Draupadi has become a name in the city even more honoured than the illustrious ladies of Vikarna's lineage—Devayani, Tapati, Girija, Sudakshina and other Maharanis I'm not feeling sorry for Draupadi, I feel sorry for you "

"For me? Because a friend dear as life to you lost control of his tongue?"

"No, not because of that But because the citizens lost control of their tongue on account of you It is the saddest thing for you that more than half the citizens firmly believe you are involved in this shabby gambling conspiracy, and that it was in fact your brainwave "

"Ah! That's all false, Ashvatthaman It was my fault really I should not have spared Jarasandha's life in the duel Then all these situations would never have risen—neither the cowries nor the dice "

"You can't not have spared it—and you will do the same again

Ashvatthaman, I laughed and said, "I knew you would come today That's why I rose so late—or I would be on the Ganga's bank by now "

"Since when did you become a know-all? Don't put me off with silly talk I heard from *Bhabhi-ji* that you returned late, well past midnight *Arre*, it's all right if you hide your sorrow, but learn to do it well "

"You, Ashvatthaman, are my guru's son, so you can enter whenever and wherever you like, and so you can get any information you desire, but have the decency at least to tell me why you have come so early today—which is something you have never done so far "

"Because I couldn't help but come "

"Why, what's the matter?" I motioned him to a seat

"The Pandavas have gone to exile in the Kamyaka forest, taking Draupadi with them—before the sun rose today "

His words stirred a fresh wave of pain in my heart. I asked sadly, "So Uncle Shakuni did insist on their going into exile even after what happened yesterday "

"No Yudhishthira took the decision himself, in order to keep his word Vrishavarman, the chief advisor Vidura, the Grandsire and Sanjaya tried their best to dissuade him, but he would listen to nobody Telling Duryodhana, 'Our kingdom of Indraprastha is now yours,' he shed his royal vesture and placed it at the feet of the Maharaja "

'Ashvatthaman, what *are* we doing? I can't make sense of anything "

'If you could understand the reasons, would there be anything else left in life? The business of the world goes on simply because we are always hoping things will turn out for the better Yudhishthira has left It had to be so It's his very nature "

'Meaning?

Love of truth—and discipline "

'Discipline? What kind of discipline is this, Ashvatthaman? Is it discipline to throw away a hard won kingdom and pack up and leave?'

"Yes And only Yudhishthira can do it If you want to see another example of his intense discipline, go to the assembly and see the iron footrest which is in front of his seat "

"What's so special about that footrest?"

"The Pandavas were rajas of Indraprastha, yet many citizens of Hastınapura, the capital of the Kauravas, went off with them to forest-exıle It's a different thing altogether that Yudhishthira pleaded and persuaded them at the city limits to return Only Rıshı Dhaumya accompanied the six of them out of the city "

"Did Yudhishthira tell you anything at the time of departure?"

"Not a word It was I who looked at his uncovered feet and said "

"What?"

"I said, 'Yudhishthira, seeing your feet I am reminded of Karna Had you Karna's skin-armour on your feet, you would not have had to endure the thorns and brambles of the forest'," Ashvatthaman said, gazing fixedly at my feet

None but Ashvatthaman could have thought of my impenetrable skin in the context of thorns and brambles I also looked at my feet They were pointed like an arrowhead—and this had always puzzled me

Vrishali entered slowly, carrying in one hand a *thali* with a gently flickering *arati*, flowers kumkum, rice grains and other articles, and in the other a bowl of fresh cow's milk Her feminine outlook considered it eminently auspicious to have a darshan of the Guru's son first thing in the morning Women tend to be invariably pious

Doing the *arati* of Ashvatthaman placing a tilak of kumkum on his forehead, she placed four grains of rice on his head, and with bhakti offered two champak flowers at his feet Ashvatthaman stooped quickly and picked up the flowers When, holding the end of her *anchal* in her right hand, she bent to prostrate herself at his feet, he self-consciously quickly turned his toes in

"*Bhabhi-ji*, do you not wish me to live long? I am younger to you " He shook his hand in denial as he said this

"You are younger in age, but you are our Guru's son You are a young rishi That is why I have shraddha for you " I supported Vrishali's views

"No matter what, I cannot accept this," Ashvatthaman said with equal obduracy

"If not the shraddha, you will surely accept the milk?" I knew his nature only too well he would never homage offered in such a manner.

Vrishali handed the bowl of milk to him Pushing back the

You were born to forgive your enemies That's your greatness What else have you done all these years?"

"This talk of yours about the forest-exile of the Pandavas is irrelevant The divine yellow garment which appeared put an end to the gambling incident—the Pandavas should have realised that "

"They should have, but they didn't It's difficult to know what and how they think, because they didn't even go visit Indraprastha for a darshan of their mother before going into exile In fact, Arjuna has sent express instructions to his mother to take Subhadra and Abhimanyu with her and go to Sri Krishna in Dvarika Draupadi has sent word to her brother Dhristadyumna to shelter her five sons in Panchala Just a little while ago the entire Pandava family was united in a single place—and now they are completely scattered "

"Ashvatthaman, I would never ask anyone else, but can I ask you one very vital question?"

"Ask ' Fine lines creased his forehead, as he wondered what I might be asking

"If I were to drive like the wind itself and ask Draupadi's forgiveness with a sincere heart, would the Pandavas agree to return?"

"Impossible The decisions of heroes are like shot arrows Leave aside you—even if Grandsire Bhishma rubs his nose at their feet, they will not return Don't *they say prevention is preferable* to cure? But did anyone ever think of prevention when dealing with the Pandavas? Neither Grandsire Bhishma, nor the Maharaja, nor the Acharya—not even my own father The birds have flown to the four quarters—and decided not to return to their nest "

"So what is to be done?" I was frightened by his analogy of the nest-abandoning birds

"Nothing Just face the facts as they come That's all " Raising his chin, he tightened the cloth round his head

Why do you have this cloth around your head all the time? For an instant I thought I would ask him, but I thought better of it, thinking it would not be polite

"I had another strange experience today," he said, tightening the knot

"What?"

Arjuna's neck in the arena Someone could have courageously interrupted the *svayamvara* and stopped me from getting insulted Someone could have stopped the pointless shameful treatment of Draupadi in the assembly Even the forest-exile of the Pandavas could have been stopped with determination But but there was no one who stepped forward All these things happened as if they were moving on a special road leading to a special destination And it was not possible to deviate from that special road now According to Ashvatthaman, there was only one way out—face bravely everything as it comes So I tried to collect my mind as best as I could But the threads of my mind were all scattered It wasn't just one sorrow that I had After a single heavy downpour at the ascendancy of the Deer Constellation, thousands of seedlings start sprouting, so my sorrows were endless, uncountable Showers of incidents questioning seedlings raising their heads But I had to remain silent I was so hemmed in by problems that I did not have even the time to think clearly The affection that Duryodhana had for me had developed into a blind faith I knew well enough that he would be the only one at my side even if the world were to end—and I at his Anyone else I could have forsaken, but it was inconceivable even to think of leaving him It was my constant hope that Duryodhana would effect a change in his thoughts, nature, and behaviour—before time ran out Otherwise

But nature isn't like a chariot horse, which you can substitute as you wish

I was numb I was afraid that I would be driven mad by the future that I visualised for myself—with the result that I sometimes felt that I should go ahead and crack my head to smithereens For the first time I was assailed by the black birds of pessimism Peace for a mind suffocated in this manner can come only in the company of dancing-girls and in the intoxication of wine It would seem that such a course was the only one open for Karna Karna had once passed his days like a royal swan or Garuda himself—and now he had to hide his head like a crow in the black pit of drunkenness Karna who absorbed solar radiance with his eyes, would now have to close them and indulge in soma-rasa In order to extinguish the fire in his mind, he would have to light the fire of wine in his stomach Instead of seeing the dark clearly with open eyes, he was going to lose his besotted self in the darkness of his mind In that

knotted cloth under his chin with his left hand, he started drinking the milk As he did so, a grain of rice slipped from his head and plopped inside the foaming bowl Transferring the bowl to his left hand, he tried a few times with his right hand to retrieve the rice grain A fleck of foam with the rice grain in it flicked off his finger on to the floor

That fleck of milky foam made me suddenly think of Radhamata My body, my fame, my fortitude—they had all been nourished on her milk But last night, in my strange state of mind, I had gone to the Ganga's bank and forgotten to massage her soles with sandalwood oil It was essential that I have her darshan now There are many temples dedicated to the supremely auspicious emotion of mother love, but a mother is the ultimate pilgrimage-spot

"I shall leave you now, Ashvatthaman You stay back " Saying this, I turned towards the door

"I shall be leaving too It's the night of the dark moon today I have to sit at the *yajna* pit and chant the Maha-mrityunjaya mantra ' He rose

Both of us left together

14

I could hardly believe that the Pandavas had left and gone into forest exile But the truth is always different from what appears to be true They had indeed left Like a snake sloughing off its shining skin and smoothly slithering far away, they had left their capital Indraprastha, a city made prosperous by their world conquest The sloughed off skin is discarded in its entirety, similarly they had left their entire kingdom behind They had not taken with them anything out of the hoard of gems, rubies, pearls, corals emeralds, topazes, diamonds, blue sapphires, onyxes, crystals, lapis lazuli, gold, cows, and maids and servants In fact, they even took off their royal robes and left them behind According to Ashvatthaman, they had departed on foot

Life had taught me that some incidents are unalterable Simultaneously it was also true that some consequences could be averted But to do that one had to make a determined effort It was perfectly within the realm of possibility for someone to step forward and prevent the garland from being placed round

"Who is it?" I turned quickly My body was twitching like the hide of a bull

"Me " It was Uncle Sanjay I recalled what he had once told me about pedigreed horses "A pedigreed horse never sits on the ground "

"Uncle! You?" I said, surprised I didn't know what else to say Clever Prabhanjana seized this opportunity to remove the strong smell of the soma-rasa by overturning near the mirror a bottle of the essence of fragrant *surpannaga* flowers The smell of the wine vanished as if by magic, only the flower fragrance pervaded the room His words echoed in the whorls of my ears "A pedigreed horse never sits on the ground "

"Why? Surprised to see me? Karna may be the Raja of Anga to the rest of the world, but to me he is Karna, the son of Adhiratha Or have you forgotten?" he asked, sitting down He gazed intently into my eyes

"No It can never be " I stooped and respectfully touched his feet

"Even more surprising than my arrival here is the arrival of a remarkable person in Hastinapura I have come to warn you to be cautious about him "

"Who is it?" I asked curiously Could it be that Krishna had come from Dvarika after learning about the forest-exile of the Pandavas?

"Rishi Durvasas," Uncle Sanjay said calmly

I wasn't surprised Why should I be surprised?

Hadn't I seen many such arrivals of rishis in Hastinapura? Durvasas was only one among many

"Raja of Anga, Durvasas' coming here will spell either the doom or the salvation of anyone in whose house he stays So it's best to put him off That's why I've come to caution you "

"The truth is, I have no desire these days to meet anyone How does Durvasas come into the picture? But, Uncle, I have to test the truth or otherwise of one statement of yours '

"Which statement?" He lifted his impressive forehead as he asked this

"Is it true that a horse that sleeps with one leg bent is useless for long journeys?"

"Yes But there's no such horse in the royal stables of Hastinapura Or if there is, I don't know about it "

darkness no one would label him as the son of a charioteer "You were wrong! You are low-born!"—no one would shoot such arrow-words at him

So I ordered a maid to summon Prabhanjana Because of Duryodhana, he could be trusted fully

Prabhanjana arrived in a short time A thin line of surprise creased his forehead This was the first time I had summoned him

"Prabhanjana, get me soma-rasa Immediately! Go " My back was turned as I ordered him I did not want to see his thick eyebrows raised questioningly

Thinking he had left in order to do the job, I turned, but I saw him standing, stubbornly, head bowed—and I became furious

"Prabhanjana! Didn't you hear what I said?" I shouted at him

"Maharaja You too " His head remained bowed

"Prabhanjana, I want soma-rasa, not advice A servant carries out orders—or have you forgotten that?"

He left, bowing, like an elephant tied with heavy chains

A little later a maid entered the palace, carrying soma-rasa Placing it on a centre table, she stood there, covering her face I felt insulted by this impertinent behaviour of Prabhanjana Was even a low-caste servant going to instruct me on what I should be doing?

"Go! Send him back," I shouted at the maid

Prabhanjana returned, looking helpless

"Prabhanjana! Fill the bowl with soma-rasa Your name means Ruin and Destruction, but there's a fiercer ruin and destruction raging in my mind right now You you are the only one worthy to fill the bowl "

With lowered head he filled a bowl and brought it to me I held it firmly As I looked into the brimming contents, I saw innumerable faces—of Radha mata, Vrishali, Shon, Supriya, Satyasena, Meghamala, Pushpavati, Ashvatthaman and Draupadi But their fleeting faces did not make me waver in my decision After all, even to waver requires conscience

The heady smell of wine numbed my nostrils as I brought the bowl close to my lips For an instant I thought I saw the disc of the sun reflected in the bowl Still I placed the bowl to my lips and closed my eyes

"Raja of Anga!" I heard someone call as he entered

The proximity of the voice startled me and the bowl slipped from my hands and fell on the floor, spilling the wine

was this orthodoxy entirely free from blame? Were the blind monarch Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandhari Devi free from orthodox restrictions, either? And who was so wise as to say that Maharani Kunti Devi was in any way different—she who had not been able to provide the proper guidance to her sons? No one could say how many other reasons—reasons of which I was not aware—were at the back of this fearful truth?

But... but everyone pointed fingers at only Karna. He was visible for all to see. I knew only too well that I wasn't totally blameless. But there was at least a reason behind my wrong behaviour. My actions were invariably sharp reactions. Was there anyone else in the capital who could come forward with such a justification? Not one. I didn't even want to say "I'm innocent! I didn't do it!" to the blustering accusers who declared that I was the prime mover and fomenter of the Kaurava-Pandava conflict. I knew that no one was entirely innocent in this matter.

The Kauravas and Pandavas were no more wishers of each other's welfare. That one incident in the assembly hall had produced more bitterness between the two than there was between Jarasandha of Magadha and Sri Krishna of Mathura. What was my role? The more I thought of it, the more I felt that I was "the hundred and first Kaurava", as Raja Duryodhana had announced. It was my duty not to run away from any fearful truth of life, not even from death. I had to bear, all alone, the consequences of the shameful treatment of Draupadi in the hall. I was readying my mind for that purpose. And as examples I could not look up to Grandsire Bhishma, Acharya Vidura, Guru Drona, Ashvatthaman, Vrishavarman, not even Raja Duryodhana. Subconsciously I looked up to only one person—Uncle Shakuni. Farseeing people like Uncle Shakuni are needed in the dense jungle of politics. At first I thought Uncle Shakuni's actions to be cunning and cruel. There are certain principles in life, which are to be cherished body and soul—thinking this, I used to oppose every political manoeuvre of his. But after long experience I had come to believe that only that person who uses his intelligence for his own benefit can hold the reins of the world. I wanted to prove to Uncle Shakuni that I was capable of even more terrible plans than he. Till now Duryodhana had been singing to Uncle Shakuni's tune; now he would dance to mine.

Fate had crushed the Karna who always cherished and parroted

I glanced casually at my feet I had not found an answer to the question of why they were so pointed at the tips

15

That single incident in the assembly hall made me lose faith in truth and idealism What Vrishali had told me about Draupadi's feelings for me further undermined that faith Whether from doubt and confusion, or from the passion of a burning mind, I had reached the nadir of my meanness by insulting Draupadi That was my first moral fall No one now could stop the consequences, which meant enmity with the Pandavas, a never-ending acrimonious hostility What Ashvatthaman had said was true The birds had flown the nest in all the four directions They would now fly wherever their wings took them

No matter how loudly anyone tried to pin the blame for this on my head, my conscience was clear on one point—I was not the only one responsible for the enmity that had resulted I didn't want to justify myself, because truth doesn't really need justification But what was the truth?

From childhood, the Kauravas, the Pandavas, and I—wasn't Guru Drona equally responsible for failing to guess their feelings correctly? Wasn't self-loving Arjuna also to blame? As for Bhima, who could never control his tongue—didn't he have a hand in it too? And what about Bhishma who, though a strong personality, was never really fair and just—wasn't he also responsible? How was it possible to exculpate Acharya Vidura who from a safe distance sweetly preached the wisdom of the Vedas and the meaning of life? And who could say that Uncle Shakuni had no hand in it either, who under cover of politics played a dirty game of dice? And what about Yudhishthira? Yudhishthira who, under the beneficial tutelage of supremely wise Sri Krishna, believed that dharma, truth, virtue, discipline and other special qualities were all his inherited private property, Yudhishthira who was repeatedly extolled sky-high by rishis and hermits as great and holy, Yudhishthira who became a pawn in the dice game—was *he* entirely innocent? And what about the social orthodoxy which made convention-ridden Draupadi heap flaming embers on my young, passionate head by saying, "I will never be the daughter-in-law of a charioteer—Karna cannot take part in this *svayamvara*"

time " There seemed to be more to his words than their brevity and indistinctness—which was to be expected of a temperamental person It did occur to me that I should perhaps bow to him, but Karna was not the type to prostrate himself before a whimsical man So I stood my ground

Duryodhana asked him for a list of essential needs, which would be sent to the palace We emerged from the thatched hut, Duryodhana deep in thought He was confused over what Rishi Durvasas had said about me and my friendship with him Placing my hand on his shoulder as we walked back, I said, "Who is this ash-smeared rishi to pass judgment on our friendship? Do you think your friendship is as trivial as water in a beggar's bowl? If need arises, I am ready to sacrifice even my flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour before I break the eternal vow of friendship I made to you with the Sun-God as witness "

"No, Karna, I don't have even a *til*-seed of doubt about your promise I have never even thought of it But it's obvious that the Pandavas will return after fourteen years, still incensed over the disrobing of Draupadi "

"Let them return You can trap Yudhishthira with another invitation to another dice-game "

"I have a plan I'll explain it if I know I have your approval "

"What plan?"

"I want the fierce hidden fire of Durvasas to fall on the head of the Pandavas I am not such a fool as to serve anyone with no purpose "

"What can Durvasas do to the Pandavas? Do you think you can uproot with a dry stick five hill-firm warriors inseparably united? I don't know what you are getting at I think it's too silly "

"No, it's not silly Durvasas will go to the thatched hut of the Pandavas in the Dvaita forest with his sixteen hundred disciples The Pandavas will have to provide hospitality and serve meals to all of them when they encamp in front of their forest-dwelling Where do you think they will get all the provisions in that desolate forest? And so, this fiery rishi will angrily cast a fatal curse on them What do you think?"

"Duryodhana, say what you like, but what I feel is that this is just the perfect time to destroy the Pandavas, if that is your aim The glory of the Pandavas is now at a low ebb A quick surprise attack—and they'll be wiped out for ever "

ideals and principles, and had wrapped his body tightly with the clothes heaped in the assembly hall Downfall—let it come once or a hundred times—it's the same

16

The respected rishi Durvasas had arrived in Hastinapura No one had the courage to approach him because he had a notoriously bad temper and he was known to be whimsical But Raja Duryodhana personally served Durvasas with great dedication He probably did not serve his own parents so devotedly I also wanted to meet rishi Durvasas I wanted to find out the significance of the mural on the palace wall of Indraprastha But I didn't want to approach him on my own In fact, I was not very keen on meeting anyone except Duryodhana

I got my opportunity one day, as a result of Duryodhana's insistence With his total dedication he had succeeded in mellowing the volcanic Durvasas into a gentle flame The pettily irascible Durvasas showed affection for Duryodhana It was a great wonder how Duryodhana's magic had transformed Durvasas in such a short time One day, at his request, I accompanied him to the thatched hut of the rishi on the bank of the Ganga I had resolved not to say a word on my behalf

When we reached, we found him meditating in the lotus posture on a tiger-skin I never could understand why people were so awed by his skinny, twig like, emaciated body After some time he opened his eyes Duryodhana stepped forward with alacrity and touched the rishi's feet with his head So—Duryodhana also bows his head before someone!—I saw this surprising truth enacted for the first time in front of me

It was Duryodhana who did the head-obeisance, but his eyes were focused on me all the time It was only by looking at his eyes that I could realise what potential there was in his frame They shone with the steady glow of topazes in the light of the sun

"Karna " A single word slipped from his lips like the twang of a bow

"Yes, Karna My closest friend, Karna the Raja of Anga," Duryodhana rose and replied

"Your friend? The Raja of Anga? Raja, he is no one's friend Nor is he the Raja of Anga He is plain Karna The whole world knows him as Karna, and will know him as Karna till the end of

17

After two months in Hastinapura, Rishi Durvasas left In this period he talked freely with just two people—Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman I did not visit the thatched hut of that strange rishi again But I did take his advice and, without fail, each morning before sunrise I sipped the gold-dust water The performance of the *arghya* offering, which had been in abeyance, was thus resolved

On instructions from Duryodhana, Prabhanjana followed Durvasas to the forest of Dvaita Accompanied by thousands of his disciples from his ashrams in the hills of Riksha Kanyaka and Himalaya, Rishi Durvasas arrived near the thatched dwelling of the Pandavas in Dvaita The least inadequacy in the provision of meals would send him into a typical towering rage and he would shake his matted locks and curse the hermit-like Pandavas And Prabhanjana would keep a close watch and report the entire proceedings by swift horse to Duryodhana I had no interest, however, in all these plans of Duryodhana

The Pandavas! The word whistled in my brain I couldn't bear to see Duryodhana losing his patience and in such a pitiable condition as a result of the mere existence of the Pandavas I had to free him from the suffocating noose which seemed to grip him Duryodhana and Karna had become two sides of the same coin I had to come to Duryodhana's aid with one aim in mind—either Karna would remain alive, or the Pandavas

Prabhanjana returned to the capital after a month He had tailed Durvasas and his disciples and witnessed all that happened Travelling through the various ashrams of Aryavarta with all his disciples, the respected rishi arrived at the thatched dwelling of the Pandavas in fifteen days That impossible rishi tried to harass the Pandavas by demanding all kinds of cooked food on each day of his stay—but his designs were frustrated by a miraculous *thali* Draupadi had a *thali* that produced every type of food by itself Even after satisfying the hunger of all, the *thali* remained full Prabhanjana concluded his report by saying that the *thali* had been presented by the Sun God to Draupadi Before leaving for the Himalaya, Durvasas paid homage to the mysterious *thali* and, instead of cursing, he blessed the Pandavas by granting them a boon The maha-rishi Durvasas had failed to please Duryodhana

"That's the last resort Come Durvasas looks enormously pleased today We can get his word today as we would like it " He took me by my hand and we turned again to the direction of the temperamental rishi's hut

Entering, he bowed, and stood with joined palms in front of Durvasas

"Well? Why are you back again? What do you want?" The rishi asked, raising his eyebrows

"Gurudeva, a prayer "

"Prayer? What for? Ask a boon!"

"If you are pleased with me, I have only one desire please stay here as long as it pleases you, after which, before you return to the Himalayas, deign to stay with the Pandavas with all your disciples for a week in the Dvaita-forest "

"Only that? *Arre*, why a week, I can stay a whole half of a lunar month "

Duryodhana laughed Bowing, he prepared to leave I moved to make way for him This action made me come in Durvasas' field of vision

"Speak up, Karna What do you want?" Again his eyebrows lifted

"Nothing " I said this softly, as I followed Duryodhana out, bowing under the low door-arch But a loud, commanding voice could be heard from behind "Karna!" Duryodhana motioned to me with his hand to go inside I didn't want to, but out of respect for his wish I did so

"Karna, listen carefully to all that I say These days you are neglecting to offer *arghya* to the Sun-God Be warned Every night fill water in a bowl—place all types of lotuses in it—every morning sprinkle gold dust in that lotus-water—and drink it religiously without fail "

Greatly amazed, I left the thatched hut How did this penance-performing rishi get to know that I was neglecting my *arghya*? Indeed, how did he know that I performed *arghya* at all? How long will these mysteries dance round me hand in hand? Was there no other warrior in the city they could pick? Why did that big bearded rishi have to choose me of all people to advise on the mystery of the gold dust water? Why didn't he choose Duryodhana?

Kauravas as my witness, I will today reveal an important secret I say this in front of Grandsire Bhishma, the chief advisor Uncle Vidura, the Maharaja and the Maharani, Gurudeva Drona and Ashvatthaman, the Raja-of-Anga Karna, brave Shon, Uncle Shakuni, skilled-in-statecraft Kanaka and others The Pandavas are not the legitimate sons of Maharaja Pandu Let me tell you what the terrible curse was that made the world-conquering Maharaja Pandu leave Hastinapura in fear and retire to the forest Let the whole assembly listen to it again That curse was 'King, when you seek lustful union with your wife, you will perish in agony like me ' How was it possible then for the Queen Mother Kunti to have sons? Is there anyone in this assembly who is willing to accept this burning falsehood? The Pandavas are the illegitimate sons of Kunti and Madri They proclaim their right over the throne of Hastinapura—but are you ready to accept their claim? Let all who felt sorry for the Pandavas when they lost the dice-game never forget that they do not have the right to set up the kingdom of Indraprastha in the Khandava forest It is an insult to let them serve in the palace even as doorkeepers—it tarnishes the age-old sanctity of the throne which has been maintained by heroic sacrifice of blood Tell me Should I, simply because they are capable, bow my head before the Pandavas and offer them half this kingdom or the kingdom of Indraprastha in the Khandava forest? So long as a warrior like the Raja-of-Anga Karna, who can shoulder the burden of the entire sky, is on our side, what reason can there be for the Kauravas to fear the Pandavas? I will go so far as to deny them the very name 'Pandu', because by doing so we insult the memory of Maharaja Pandu I will call them Kaunteyas, sons of Kunti, and Madreyas, sons of Madri I have called this assembly of all the council members in order to see that the Pandavas are destroyed before it is too late Heroic warriors of the Kauravas! Shouldn't you take steps to uproot the Kaunteyas while they are still isolated and resourceless? You will know best " Waving both hands, he asked this question

The words of Duryodhana made all the members stand up, as if they had been assaulted with maces Some lifted their hands and shouted, "King, show us the road that leads to the forest of Dvaita—right now! The Kaunteyas must be annihilated No person will be allowed to stay alive in Hastinapura who blackens the sacred name of Maharaja Pandu " The hall resounded with the

Listening to the account with his hands clasped behind his back, Duryodhana paced the room up and down like a caged tiger Raising his eyebrows, he shouted at his dear and faithful retainer, "Idiot! You dare to utter such displeasing words before your king! You should have perished by fire in the forest, like Purochana "

Prabhanjana started trembling, but he was really not at fault All he had done was obey instructions

"Go,' I ordered him Head bowed, he left, upset

I stared fixedly at confused and worried Duryodhana and said, "Raja, can it be that the Pandavas can upset you so much? In that case, why not call a meeting of the royal council and attack the Pandavas? Even if no one supports you, you can always count on me Do you think this is a workable plan?"

"Raja of Anga, I know very well there is only one warrior in all Hastinapura who can face the Pandavas—who is as firm as a golden mountain, who has the chest of a lion—and that is Karna "

"Then why do you weave fanciful imaginings of impossible things, as flimsy as *semal* fluff?"

"You will never understand why But I see no harm in your suggestion to call an assembly of the Kaurava council in order to get the views of the warriors "

This was the first time that my idea had been acted upon But one thought continued to puzzle me even after I had left Duryodhana What was the divine bhakti that Draupadi offered to the Sun-God that made him gift her the miraculous *thali*? If I could get to know the secret, I would assiduously follow in her footsteps—not to obtain any *thali*, not even to obtain arms and weapons, but to come closer to my path-showing guru, in order to make my life more and more radiant

18

As planned, Duryodhana summoned the royal council Each member was going to be carefully scrutinised at this meeting The aim was to decide how long the unending game of hide-and-seek with the Pandavas was going to be played

As soon as the hall was full, the chief minister announced the purpose Then rose Duryodhana, raising his clenched fist, he said, "No matter what happens, the Pandavas cannot lay a finger on the throne of the Kauravas With the ancient, sacred throne of the

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Kauravas as my witness, I will today reveal an important secret I say this in front of Grandsire Bhishma, the chief advisor Uncle Vidura, the Maharaja and the Maharani, Gurudeva Drona and Ashvatthaman, the Raja-of-Anga Karna, brave Shon, Uncle Shakuni, skilled-in-statecraft Kanaka and others The Pandavas are not the legitimate sons of Maharaja Pandu Let me tell you what the terrible curse was that made the world-conquering Maharaja Pandu leave Hastinapura in fear and retire to the forest Let the whole assembly listen to it again That curse was 'King, when you seek lustful union with your wife, you will perish in agony like me ' How was it possible then for the Queen Mother Kunti to have sons? Is there anyone in this assembly who is willing to accept this burning falsehood? The Pandavas are the illegitimate sons of Kunti and Madri They proclaim their right over the throne of Hastinapura—but are you ready to accept their claim? Let all who felt sorry for the Pandavas when they lost the dice-game never forget that they do not have the right to set up the kingdom of Indraprastha in the Khandava forest It is an insult to let them serve in the palace even as doorkeepers—it tarnishes the age-old sanctity of the throne which has been maintained by heroic sacrifice of blood Tell me Should I, simply because they are capable, bow my head before the Pandavas and offer them half this kingdom or the kingdom of Indraprastha in the Khandava forest? So long as a warrior like the Raja-of-Anga Karna, who can shoulder the burden of the entire sky, is on our side, what reason can there be for the Kauravas to fear the Pandavas? I will go so far as to deny them the very name 'Pandu', because by doing so we insult the memory of Maharaja Pandu I will call them Kaunteyas, sons of Kunti, and Madreyas, sons of Madri I have called this assembly of all the council members in order to see that the Pandavas are destroyed before it is too late Heroic warriors of the Kauravas! Shouldn't you take steps to uproot the Kaunteyas while they are still isolated and resourceless? You will know best " Waving both hands, he asked this question

The words of Duryodhana made all the members stand up, as if they had been assaulted with maces Some lifted their hands and shouted, "King, show us the road that leads to the forest of Dvaita—right now! The Kaunteyas must be annihilated No person will be allowed to stay alive in Hastinapura who blackens the sacred name of Maharaja Pandu " The hall resounded with the

passionate declamations of those present. Duryodhana's advice was unanimously accepted. This was the first time Raja Duryodhana had received such total support.

"Wait!" The voice twanged like an arrow thudding on stone. Grandsire Bhishma, trembling, snatched the royal sceptre from the hand of Maharaja Dhritarashtra. Once before, in the arena, he had taken the sceptre in his hand when speaking on my behalf. The same energy and radiance flamed from his aged body. There was no doubt that he would come out with some startling piece of wisdom. This old man, who had such affection for the Pandavas, was going to spoil everything. Sceptre in hand, the old patriarch released his sharp wordy arrows.

"Warriors of the Kauravas! The allegations that Duryodhana has been making in this hall in the last half hour are such as have not been made by even a servant or a maid since the inception of this assembly council. Maharani Kunti is blameless. She is indeed the finest of the royal ladies who were named by Vikarna in this very hall—Girija, Sudakshina, Tapati, Nalini, Draupadi. Not just that—if anyone were to ask me today, 'Who is the finest hero of the Kauravas?' I would proudly reply, 'Kunti!'—the reason being that, though a mere woman, she has borne her sufferings with a Himalayan patience that I fail to find in any of you. Therefore I am compelled to reveal today the secret regarding the Kuru lineage which I have kept hidden in my heart so long. I am sorry that I have to sprinkle the cool water of this truth on your bubbling *passions. Whose kingdom is it that Duryodhana is rousing you to* defend and protect? Who are its rightful heirs? The hundred Kaurava sons of Dhritarashtra? Or the five sons of Pandu? Who should get the kingdom? Who has the right to sit on the throne? Who should hold this royal sceptre? Warriors of the Kauravas! You whose feats make all Aryavarta tremble! You will be shocked to learn that the only person who has the right to occupy the throne which your ancestors religiously protected is—" He turned his white-haired head and surveyed the entire assembly.

Eagerness gripped them all. Whose name was he going to utter? The Kauravas or the Pandavas?

"—neither a Kaurava nor a Pandava."

Breathless anticipation. Straightening my back, I waited, alert. Why was my body covered with impenetrable skin-armour all over?—that did not surprise me so much as what might be the all-

uprooting forthcoming truth Why were we listening to this? How could we trust it was true? Of course the speaker was Grandsire Bhishma who was the embodiment of Truth

"Who then is the rightful heir of the Kurus?" Someone courageously interrupted the silence in the hall

"I am " Grandsire Bhishma, steadying the shaking sceptre in his hand, spoke up, he looked like a tall peak of the Himalayas Each word of his cascaded thunderously down—"Bhishma who stands in front of you is the last of the Kauravas who still hopes to find a ray of light in this confusion The Kauravas and Pandavas are not of Kuru lineage Why is it then that they are at each other's throats like feuding enemies caught in a generation-after-generation vendetta? I am saddened trying to find out the reason That is why, in order to clarify the true lineage of the Kauravas, I stand here with a burden of stones on my head Listen carefully—Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura are brothers They have the same father—Vyasa, the son of Parashara—though it is true that the mothers are different The hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, who are present in this hall, are all descendants of Vyasa So is Prince Duryodhana The Pandavas are not Pandu's sons This is true, it is equally true that they are not children of shame Who dares to say that the children born to Maharani Kunti and Madri by the grace of the powerful mantra of Rishi Durvasas can be children of shame? An even more frightening truth is that the Pandavas are not five, as you think There is a sixth Pandava But the world never saw him because because I have always seen him from his birth trapped in the coils of an unfortunate fate I have always been grieved by this

"That is why I repeat for the last time—I say this as the last Kaurava among you Kauravas—that the kingdom which was expanded by Pandu's world-conquest and which Dhritarashtra administered and fostered should be equally divided between the Kauravas and the Pandavas Duryodhana who is the leader of the Kauravas and an accomplished mace-wielder should at least keep the ideal of his mace-guru in front of him His guru Balarama would not break even a twig without taking the advice of his brother Sri Krishna The Kauravas and the Pandavas should see the relationship of Sri Krishna and Balarama with wide open eyes And Karna who has been praised so highly by Duryodhana—he too should show his ability to rise to the highest pinnacle of heaven

if he so desires No member of this assembly should forget that the Queen Mother Kunti is virtuous and that her sons are illustrious warriors " Trembling all over, Grandsire Bhishma sat down

No one was interested any more in the proceedings of the assembly Finally the noble advisor Vidura, the chief minister and the Maharaja spoke, but nobody was so composed in mind as to listen to them attentively True, the astonishment of all exceeded limits seeing Maharani Gandhari Devi suddenly stand up She somehow managed to speak one sentence "Duryodhana, come to your senses, and call back the Pandavas while there is still time " Then, turning her bandaged face around the hall, she also resumed her seat

The meeting dispersed My mind kept revolving around one idea Who was the "sixth Pandava" referred to by Grandsire Bhishma? Supposing a reconciliation between the Pandavas and Kauravas turned out to be impossible, would he turn up suddenly and help out his brothers? Was he also born of mantra shakti, like the other Pandavas? Was he an extraordinary person? If I had occasion to battle him, would I turn out the weaker one? How could he be born unfortunate? Who would describe the other Pandavas as fortunate, anyway? My mind whirled around these queries like a dry leaf The Pandavas and the Kauravas—not one of them had Kuru blood If Grandsire Bhishma was indeed the last Kaurava, whose throne was it?—this question had become even more complex Who would unravel this tangle? Stallions of doubt raced in the courtyard of my mind, it was impossible to know which to stop With head bowed, with heavy steps I was leaving behind the white palace courtyard The rays of the setting sun, falling from the walls of the palace to the floor, produced strange colourful patterns One end of my shawl had slipped from my shoulder and trailed behind me with a rustling sound The other end I had wrapped tightly round my wrist as I made my way Nothing seemed to make sense Why do someone's sorrows evoke sympathetic pain in others? What kind of world is this?

I felt a tug on my shawl Thinking it had caught somewhere, I turned hoping to pull it free It was Ashvatthaman, holding on tightly to my shawl's end Seeing me, he smiled I was surprised Why hadn't the incidents in the hall a few minutes ago left any impression on his mind?

"What thoughts are you lost in now?" he asked affectionately,

as always, as he stepped forward and placed the end of the shawl on my shoulder

"Thoughts? Which thoughts?" I replied awkwardly I knew this would not satisfy him

"Let's go out of the city for a walk You are looking much too preoccupied "

"No I don't feel like it If you need someone to go with you, take Shon " I had no intention of going anywhere

"Shon and Karna are two very different people I want Karna to accompany me Come " He took my hand in his, and pointed his finger to the main door of the palace I had no choice, so I trailed along, because he would never have asked anyone except me in this way

As we crossed the threshold of the main entrance, I couldn't restrain myself any more and I asked him, "Who is the sixth Pandava to whom Grandsire Bhishma referred today? What do you think?"

"Who am I to know? It's hard to believe that there are six Pandavas, yet it cannot be anything but true if Grandsire Bhishma says so Anyway, how does it matter to us who the sixth Pandava is? It's true, though, that anyone can imagine what he must be like " He also stepped over the main threshold, and both of us walked out of the city limits

"What could he be like?" Ashvatthaman was a profound analyst of life

"Certainly not like one of the Pandavas "

"Like who then? In what way would he be different from the Pandavas?"

"In every way He could be more charming than them He could be the youngest He would be the way he was brought up, because life is nothing but samskaras Even the worm that hides in the flower's mouth gets placed at the feet of the idol simply because it happens to be in good company "

"There are those with whom we never get on, and there are others whom we instinctively like What is the reason of this causeless like and dislike?" I asked him

"Our attitudes to a person are built up from childhood. Circumstances do change them a little sometimes But the feeling of disrespect that develops in childhood is like blood that coagulates on one's foot when it strikes against a stone The blood becomes a

"Then what is life all about? Just a calamity, is it?" I changed the subject a little

"No Life is an eternal river flowing through the territory of existence and death, struggling for salvation and yearning to unite with the ocean which is God "

"Salvation? You mean painless death? Is that your idea of salvation?"

"No Salvation is a ceaseless, seamless radiance, a self-aware, shining, bodiless, thought-less reality This radiance is the sole expression of the atman If you open your eyes and see carefully, you will find every single creature of nature thirsting for even the smallest fragment of this radiance—and you will be stunned by this fact Why do insects hurl themselves blindly at a flame? Trees, creepers, grasses—all lift their heads, longingly, in the direction of light No one can carry on without realising that the one stable truth of this universe is light, radiance "

"Why then is man unable to posses this radiance with ease? If light is the stable truth of the world, why is it so difficult of attainment?"

"Life's goal is radiance, the Ultimate Radiance To achieve it, experience is essential—experience of various kinds and intensities Even after a multiplicity of experiences, I might find that the radiance I achieved was not the radiance I was looking for Only after realising, will it strike a seeker that he should turn towards the innermost atman He is restless to do so In his desperation, man will have to acknowledge the fact that there is ultimately only one road left for him to travel—and that is the path of spirituality "

"No, Ashvatthaman I have pierced through so many layers of Time in order to get a glimpse of the future, but I doubt if I or anyone else will ever believe that the day you say will dawn is going to dawn What's the point in running around with hopes and dreams in your heart?'

"You are still confused But it's not your fault The truth is that man's mind is a very complex thing—like the wheel of a chariot The wheel has many spokes, but the real observer sees only the hub which holds all these spokes together According to you, you have pierced through countless layers of Time in order to get one glimpse of the future, but the real question is whether Time has all these countless layers to which you refer Or is it that we trap Time into days, months, seasons and years in order to suit our

convenience? It seems to me that what is likely to occur is a greviously erroneous creation of man. Ponder this a little deeply. Is Time ever past or future? Time is a single unbroken fact, and only the realisation of Time as an unbroken continuity and unity can remove man's fears." His divine wisdom overflowed. Neither of us realised that we had arrived within half a *yojana* of the town, because we were absorbed in our conversation. Outside the town limits was the Vishnu temple. Thinking, *We should visit the temple and have a darshan since we are so near it*, we entered it. Dusk was approaching. A few *saranga*-birds flew across the pink-flushed horizon, emitting cries.

After the darshan, we came out from the temple. The vibration of the bell of the inner sanctum shaken by Ashvatthaman echoed sweetly in my ears. As soon as he emerged, he lifted his finger to the temple dome. "You see that?" he asked, standing stock-still.

"Yes. The golden pot glowing in the light of the setting sun is an enchanting sight."

"No. I don't mean the golden pot on the dome. Look at the thin crack in the stone wall under it at the temple top—there's a peepal shoot visible."

"What about it?"

"You may think it useless, but I find it very significant. It waves its reddish leaves and declares, 'I will live even if I have to stand on the head of this stone. I will struggle against the blasts of wind if I have to.' Even a tiny shoot will not succumb to stone in the pattern of Nature. And as for man..."

He stopped abruptly. We turned to the direction of the town. On the way lay the military academy, where his thatched hut was also located. He caressed my hand affectionately and said, "Karna, forget all that I have said. I am no greater knower of the mystery of Brahman, nor have you been born in order to ponder the profound secrets of life. Your life is meant for action only, because the path of life that you have traversed so far is filled with the deeds of illustrious heroes." He released my hand, and entered the military academy by the smaller security door. His turban grazed against the top of the door frame, and the next moment he had disappeared inside. How thoughtful was his discourse! Occasionally he would clarify various aspects of life to me. Before leaving, he had said, "Your life is meant for action only."

Everyone's life is meant for action, but each individual discovers a special, a unique purpose

I returned As I entered the palace, I saw father in the royal stables He was instructing the grooms regarding the feeding of horses He was old, and his body looked frail His back was bent, but his mind was as fresh as before I had repeatedly told him, "You must now rest," but he had a fixed reply, "Vasu, the body tires, but not the mind A man has to have something to do "

My life had been nourished on such statements as these His extraordinary hardships had transformed my thatched hut life into a palatial one As far as I knew, I was the only son of a charioteer in the whole of Aryavarta on whose head a golden crown had been placed—and full credit for this went to my parents Wealth, fame, domestic joy, the pleasure of having a son—all were mine But my greatest happiness was the protective affection which I received from my father and mother In the palace, everyone addressed Radha-mata as "Raj mata' This made Vrishali lovingly tell me, ' It's because of you that everyone calls her Raj mata " But how would my simple wife know that it was on account of my mother that everyone called me Karna', ' Raja of Anga , and "Maha raja ?

So I went to the stables With bowed head I said gently "Pitaji why did you take all this trouble of coming here? The grooms here do the work well enough, and there is Uncle Sanjaya to keep an eye on them "

Steadying his quivering neck he replied "Is it you Vasu? Child it s not easy to give up a lifetime of habit Can you give up your archery? I am ill at ease in the palace I was born among horses I grew up with them Their shuffling is music to my ears Look at the variety of horses here! Just to look at them brings so much peace to my mind '

'But—it's twilight now Let's go back to the palace I am also going upstairs '

Very well ' He placed his hand in mine With my support he accompanied me It was my duty as the eldest son to look after him as much as I could Placing his weight on my shoulder, he climbed slowly up the stairs The first day I arrived in Hastinapura, I had climbed up in the same fashion, with my hand in his Now his hand was on my shoulder, as he went up the stairs

19

I reached father to his room in the palace. Sushena, Vrishaketu, Susharma and Minakshi were sitting around Radha-mata, listening to a story. Seeing me, they started clapping. The littlest one, Vrishaketu, ran forward and clung to my legs. They were all quite alert and intelligent. Though young in age, they looked quite grown up because they were strong and well-built. They respected, even feared me; but loved me equally also.

I stroked Vrishaketu's head and said, "When are you going to grow up like the others?"

"I'll allbays be thmall," he lisped.

"Why, you silly one?"

"Because big-big people have to *namaskara* big Mother. I sit in her lap." He enjoyed the benefits he received because he happened to be small. I picked him up and smelled his head affectionately. That little rascal, as always, shook my flesh-ear-rings. Taking leave of Radha-mata I went away. It thrilled me to see the grandchildren sitting happily with Radha-mata.

I returned to my palace. Mrinal must have announced my arrival to Vrishali, who was cooking in the kitchen. We did have many girl-attendants to cook, but Vrishali personally supervised the special dishes that pleased my palate. She hurried to my room as soon as Mrinal mentioned me. I had removed the crown from my head, and was holding it. She stepped forward, took the crown from my hands, and said, "Must have been a lot of work in the assembly today."

"No, Vrishali. I went for a stroll outside the city with my guru's son." She stopped questioning at the mention of Ashyatthaman. She placed the crown carefully on a wooden seat.

Informing us that the food had been served, Mrinal went to fetch father. She escorted him slowly inside. Behind them came Vrishasena, Prasena, Bhanusena, Susharma, Sushena, and Chitrasena. Such was the family custom for the last fourteen years. The menfolk sat and ate together. Only after father started eating would the others begin. After us the ladies ate—and they would touch the food only after Radha-mata started eating.

Vrishali had new dishes prepared every day. Everyone was all praise for the style of her cooking. Sometimes she ordered the preparation of sweet pancakes, sweet curd, baked dishes, rice in

thickened sweet milk, at other times she arranged for sweets dipped in cow's milk, besides these, curd of two-milk whey, *dahi*, fresh butter, plain milk as well as milk from a cow during the first seven days after calving, *phasta* and other confections made of cow's milk I particularly relished the sweet pancakes and fresh butter Seeing them, Shon would glance sharply at me and remark to Vrishali, "*Bhabhi*-ji, I've had them so often that I'm also beginning to enjoy the sweet breads Their real enjoyer won't get much of them now " That was how he managed to get his favourite dish without fail the next day—rice in thickened sweet milk Sometimes there used to be even a curry of delicious *maladhoka* bird-meat

"Where is Satyasena?" I asked, because I could not spot him in the group

His wife Pushpavati replied with lowered head, "He has gone to Shakal, the capital of the Madras, with a special message from the Kauravas " It would take him at least eight days to return after meeting Shalya, the Raja of Madra For eight days his *thali* would be served in the usual way, and its contents fed to the cows later

But my mind was not in the food The others were vigorously applying themselves to the tasty dishes Only Shon realised that I was not enjoying my meal as I used to He said to Vrishali, '*Bhabhi*-ji, everyone here says a wife starts loving her husband less after a son is born That's not all untrue Because if it was true, you would have guessed why Bhaiya today is eating so poorly "

"No, Shon, it's no fault of her," I reprimanded

"Why, Vasu, you don't seem to be enjoying even your favourite dish today," father finally said

"No, father My mind's preoccupied with an important problem It'll surprise you too when you know about it "

"What problem?"

' The problem of the sixth Pandava Do you know that there are six Pandavas, not five?" I asked, staring at his forehead, which was corrugated with wrinkles like the *sagvan* leaf Gulping the bite, he opened his mouth, but no words came out His eyes became moist Vrishali quickly brought a bowl of water to his lips A single sip cleared his throat

"Who told you this?" he asked in a trembling voice

"Not just me, Grandsire Bhishma announced it publicly today before the whole assembly "

"Grandsire Bhishma? Then it must be so There are more than five Pandavas "

"Not only that, he added that *neither the* Kauravas *nor the* Pandavas have Kuru blood in them His words make it obvious that the throne is now at the mercy of brute force "

"If the Grandsire said so, it must be true I'm going to tell you another truth today, for the first time, because I had kept silent when everyone taunted you in the arena " He paused momentarily I pricked my ears

"Vasu, you were insulted, branded as the son of a charioteer, and you bravely faced your detractors Look how much Vidura-ji is respected as a counsellor in the palace today! His word never goes in vain."

His three sentences seemed to be all disconnected, yet I replied, "Yes, father But he also does not have Kuru blood Pitamaha Bhishma made that clear also He said, 'I am the sole descendant left of the Kauravas of Hastinapura' "

"No, Vasu It is a fact that the learned counsellor Vidura is the son of a maid, but it is not completely true that Grandsire Bhishma is the last of the Kaurava dynasty There is another Kaurava in Hastinapura itself, in whose veins courses Kuru blood, but he remains an ordinary mortal because of traditional social constraints generation after generation "

"Who is that last Kaurava?" I raised my eyebrows in surprise

He drank from the bowl brought by Vrishali, and said huskily, "I "

"You?"

"Yes My father Satkarman was a descendant of the world-conquering Kaurava emperor Yayati But from his mother's side he was a charioteer A maid's son Vidura has attained the post of chief counsellor in this kingdom But Yayati's descendant Adhiratha became a keeper of the stables Vasu, this is the truth You are the Raja of Anga That is enough to make me blessed " He paused, and took another sip of water To comfort me, he had revealed the secret of his ancestry

I stood up, without finishing my meal *We are the descendants of Maharaja Yayati*—this thought gave my mind a strange contentment But no profound joy I wasn't so naive now as to start dancing jubilant at any surprising news

Washing my hands, I relaxed on my bed. My mind went back

to the words of Ashvatthaman. Seeing the pipal shoot emerge joyously from the crack in a stone wall, he had remarked, "It's as if the plant is saying, after stamping its feet on the head of the hostile stone, 'I must live I must sway to the flow of the breeze '"

I made up my mind to take that pipal as my ideal There was no point in moaning over circumstances

20

All night I reflected deeply on Ashvatthaman's profound observations on the meaning of life His wisdom was a pleasure to listen to But how many people in this world succeed in putting wisdom into practice? One needs help from everyone in this world—but the world is not ready to help anyone That was my recurring experience of life The Pandavas were in exile, but they hadn't gone to earn religious merit on a pilgrimage They would definitely return after thirteen years They were five wounded snakes who, after thirteen years of secrecy in the forest, would surface some time or other and sting the feet of both Duryodhana and Karna "They have disappeared in the forest"—if, thinking that, I remained inactive, that would indeed be extreme folly It is best not to allow any hostility to develop in one's life, but if it happens, it should be extinguished Sooner or later it starts purulating Karna or the Pandavas—I would allow only one or the other I did not want the Pandava sword to dangle permanently over the head of Duryodhana Pitamaha Bhishma was strongly advocating that half the kingdom should be handed to the Pandavas I was completely in disagreement The kingdom must not be dismembered It should be either a Pandava kingdom or a Kaurava The Grandsire had remained conveniently silent when there was still time to speak But now, discovering the noose was tightening around the necks of the Pandavas, he became upset, and his love for them made him speak up He had quenched all the enthusiasm of the members of the assembly But Karna was not going to be trapped by his words I did not need the help of any warrior, I could handle the Pandavas alone I would see for myself what fibre those five heroes were made of I was looking for a chance to apprise Duryodhana of my decision But it was impossible to get him alone in the palace Uncle Shakuni, Duhshasana, Prabhanjana, the chief minister, Maharani Bhanumati, Princess Duhshala Devi, the

Kaurava warriors of the assembly—one or the other of these always surrounded him I simply couldn't get him alone at any time to tell him what I wanted to

There was only one way to catch him alone—and that was to go on a hunt. So I arranged to send a message to him through Shon to the effect that I had organised a hunt in the forest of Varanavata He was pleased with the idea

We would leave the palace for the hunt a few days later, and proceed towards the outskirts of Indraprastha, where the forest of Varanavata was located, and to do so we would have to cross the Ganga and the Ikshumati rivers The tradition was that whoever went hunting could not return to the palace without a kill It so happened sometimes that a hunter had to stay in the forest for a whole month before he could fulfil this condition

21

Hunting wasn't the only reason we went out I wanted to speak to Duryodhana in total privacy We had about fifty expert horsemen accompanying us—no more I had omitted Shon's name from the hunt

Our ivory-white mares sped through the city, necks stretched, in the fierce heat of the afternoon In the scorching hot month of Vaisakh, the sweltering citizens were relaxing behind half-closed doors, which is why there was not a single soul to be seen on even the main roads None except the general knew where we were bound, and why Even the horsemen accompanying us were not entirely in the know of things Ahead of us was the horseman who showed the way, the rest were all behind us, at varying distances

The enormous expanse of the Ganga, which in the monsoon was an overflowing receptacle, was in places reduced now to a mere trickle because of the oppressive summer We galloped over the trickle, our horses reflected in the water as we leapt, splashing, in a steady line, We left the Ikshumati river behind This was the starting point of the dense Varanavata forest, where the boundaries of Indraprastha and Hastinapura met,

As soon as they reached the forest, the horsemen, according to plan, scattered in all the four directions Brandishing lances and shouting, they would make the forest tremble with their cacophony Frightened by their cries, the forest deer would leap and

bound away from them From our vantage point on the dunes, we would pierce the scared deer running in front of us It had been decided that, the instant we took aim from our dunes, I would shoot four arrows with bells attached to them in the four directions in order to signal the noise-making horsemen—and only then would they start their clamorous beatings

We selected a dune on a low alluvial stretch In front of us was a flat plain of green grass I took aim and shot the four arrows They whistled and tinkled away in the four directions The scattered horsemen were alerted Shouting and screaming and beating drums, they harassed the creatures of the forest out of their peaceful, cool haunts The forest screamed like a diseased, agonising invalid A bedlam of noises ensued *Sarangas*, *chitrarathas*, red sheldrakes, pigeons, eagles, kokilas, *patrarathas* and flocks of other birds flapped, screeching, in the air, visible to us on the dune A little later, trumpeting shrilly, a herd of elephants lumbered across suddenly on the green level stretch

Both of us were ready and waiting, with bows stretched taut Duryodhana swung his bow in keeping with the gait of one of the largest in the elephant herd, in an attempt to aim correctly I signalled him to wait There was no point in felling an elephant We did not have even the proper attendants to carry an elephant carcass back to the palace That trunk-waving trumpeting herd ran sinuously like a meandering river in a hilly region, and crossed the grassy plain

A short while later, from a dense clamp of trees, a flock of fifty or so deer bounded along the plain like a waterfall Our hands swerved, aiming arrows at their vital parts Our vantage point and the flock—after calculating the distance between the two, and their speed and the speed of the arrow, one had to aim at a spot somewhere ahead of the mouth

"S-u-u u n-n n-n! S-u-u u n-n-n!" The arrows streamed out of our bows Pierced in the chest, countless deer toppled, like ripe *audumbar* fruit flopping on the ground in a gusty breeze The remnants of the herd bounded across the plain without even casting a glance at their stricken companions The hunt was over, we breathed sighs of relief

Duryodhana glanced at me and asked, "How many arrows did you shoot?"

"Six And you?" I asked, looking at the vast green plain

"Five," he replied, gazing also at the pasturage.

"Which means we'll find eleven deer altogether. Or five deer with two arrows in each, and one felled with a single arrow," I said, rising.

"Let's go and see." He tried to stand up, but before he could do so, a sudden heart-rending scream "Karna!" issued from his lips and he collapsed on the grass like a shattered mountain peak. What could have happened to make a mace-wielding hero scream who only an instant ago was all athrill with the delights of the hunt? Unable to make sense of this, worried, I stooped and placed my arm under his arm-pit in order to lift him up... but what I saw made my heart stop. A huge python had swallowed his left leg right up to his knee while he was absorbed in the hunt. Because his legs were encased in leather shoes, Duryodhana did not feel the snake's jaws. To prevent his victim from escaping, the python had swung its tail and wound its coils around Duryodhana. That python had managed to clutch the future emperor of Hastinapura in its jaws as it might a baby rabbit. The crown had fallen and lay in the dust of the pasturage. Duryodhana struggled to get free, like a fish flapping out of water, but each effort made him even more tightly captive in the python's embrace. Both rolled and tumbled on the ground. Fearful of a horrendous death, Duryodhana screamed "Karna! Karna!" and, biting his lips, thrust the arrow in his hand repeatedly in the python's kundalini, oblivious to the possibility that he might injure his own leg in the process. Sometimes I saw the python, sometimes Duryodhana. Weird! Horripilating! Flailing his right leg, Duryodhana thrashed about violently. The grass was flattened and crushed. In front of my very eyes, I saw that magnificent mace-hero tied up like a bundle of sticks, helpless in the python's clutches. "Karna!" he wailed, giving up all hope of life. His last shriek seemed almost to slice through the sky. Screaming, he jerked his body with all his strength and lost consciousness.

It was not possible for me to remain a spectator any longer—but what could I do? It was not easy to think of a solution right then. I stood there, dumbfounded, staring at the huge reptile. I was all agitated, troubled by concern for the poor victim. I had no weapon except the remaining arrows in my hand. Even if I had, what use would it be? Who could have used a weapon without injuring Duryodhana who was trapped in the python's coils? It was

impossible to shoot an arrow at that fearful sinuous creature No solution came to my mind I slumped down on a slab of stone and did some hard quick thinking Evening was fast descending, and each moment counted It was a matter of life and death for my dearest friend who had helped me up the highest pinnacle of success I glanced westwards, trying to guess how long it would take for the shades of evening to arrive The resplendent Sun-God stood in the centre of two tall peaks, spilling his deathless, seamless rays on the head of earth A strange thrill raced through me—a thrill never experienced before, indescribable, unwavering

I rose, without any more thinking I stepped forward, flung away my bow, and lifted the snake and Duryodhana across my back The mere touch of such a slimy creature was like death Ah, in how many ways does death pursue life! Carrying that life-death dichotomy on my back, I balanced myself and descended in the light of the setting sun My mind was a whirl of thoughts What if Duryodhana did not survive this predicament? What was there left for me or for Hastinapura then? Nothing came to my mind But I doggedly kept striding across the pasturage I could see the horsemen in the distance collecting the dead deer I had to reach them somehow or other With this in mind, I walked determinedly and swiftly ahead with the weird-looking, stone-heavy python across my shoulders My entire life had been a story of similar strange and difficult tests Today's incident was specially horripilating

Guessing that I was bringing on my back a kill from the hunt, the horsemen on the plain gathered in a group and clapped and shouted But as I approached them, their eyes widened and they stared at me like stone statues Half of them surely must have thought I was some kind of a fool Thoughts stormed into mind, "How could Duryodhana's life be saved? '

Reaching near them, I knelt and lowered the python on the ground Wiping my forehead with the end of my shawl, I glanced at the reptile Only the head of a half-dead, unconscious Duryodhana was visible out of the snake's coils He lay there, as lifeless as a log of wood in the writhing coils which tightened their hold with every passing instant Glaring, I shouted at the horsemen, ' What are you staring at like a pack of cowards? The palace people will spit on you and shave your hair and parade you on donkeys when they discover that a python has swallowed the Raja of Hastinapura Pin down that cruel reptile and free the Raja from its coils "

All fifty or so of the horsemen, alerted by the order, stepped forward in batches of ten and carefully pried open each coil of that enormous creature. But... but it refused to release Duryodhana's leg from its jaws in spite of their desperate exertions. The twisting, strong reptile lashed out with each coil in an attempt to ward off the batches of rescuers and fling them far away. But the men had pinned it down wherever they could clutch it and hung on to it as if it was a length of rope. Tightening my shawl around myself, I stepped forward.

The creature closed its eyes and prepared to meet this unexpected attacker. I thrust my fingers in its mouth; with a powerful jerk I pulled both the jaws apart. The muscles of my arms swelled. I bit my lips so hard that drops of blood trickled from them on my shawl.

"Arishtasena! Pull the leg out!" I ordered one of the horsemen. He dashed forward and pulling the leg out of the jaws, he lifted the unconscious body of the Raja and placed it ten arm's-lengths away on the ground.

"Lift that deer and shove its leg in the snake's mouth." My arms were weakening. I said this, gesturing with my eyebrows in the direction of the deer.

Arishtasena dragged up a deer and thrust not one but both its legs in the reptile's yawning mouth, held apart by me. I relaxed my grip. The python clamped its jaws tight. My forehead was bathed in sweat. My nostrils were flaring. Removing my hands from the jaws, I wiped the sweat from my forehead. It all happened in an instant. The sight of unconscious Duryodhana lying on the grass shocked me. Which Raja? What kind of Raja? All figments of the imagination. All mirages. That would-be Emperor of Hastinapura, lying lifeless like a log of wood on a pasturage.... Alone! An ordinary python had become an Emperor's nemesis.

I rushed to his side. As I gently ran my hands on his jaw-trapped leg, I felt two broken snake-fangs. The stupid, gruesome thing had allowed its fangs to snap rather than, out of fear, disengage them. I yanked them out. The infuriated horsemen started hurling stones at the mauled reptile. I raised my hand and shouted, "Stop!" Astonished, they placed the stones on the ground. Remembering their Raja, they ignored the snake and rushed to Duryodhana's unconscious body near me.

I glanced once at the senseless python He had taught me a basic lesson It is best not to stick your fangs in any odd place, but once you do, you should expect that they break before they can be taken out

I motioned to them to place Duryodhana on a horse Lifting him carefully, they laid him on his stomach on a large horse I breathed easily

"Arishtasena, how many deer were bagged in the hunt?" a horseman asked Today's hunt was unforgettable It's possible my aim was not accurate

"Six," he replied, respectfully, with bowed head

"How many arrows in each?"

"One in each, Maharaja," he replied, bowing again In spite of that grisly incident, I couldn't help smiling None of the horsemen could make out why I smiled It was not possible for them to know Only a conscious Duryodhana could have known

Leaving one deer as the python's meal, we returned with five The reason I had persuaded Duryodhana to come out of the palace on a deer hunt was kept in abeyance I couldn't even speak to Duryodhana on account of the unexpected turn of events

We stopped briefly near a spring in the course of returning through the dense forest No sooner did I sprinkle cool water on his face than Duryodhana revived Wide-eyed, he asked, "Where are we?" His forehead was a web of wrinkles

"This is the forest of Varanavata We came here on a deer hunt The hunt is over " I reminded him of only the hunt

'Deer hunt! How many deer did we bag?" On reviewing, he asked exactly this question

"Five," I replied, smiling

We had to leave one deer behind Why include him? So I argued to myself

"Five How many arrows in each?"

"One ' I spoke the exact fact

"One Splendid "

In an instant he forgot the fearful incident that had just happened At least so it seemed He did not raise that subject at all Happy with the belief that he had downed five deer with five arrows, he leapt up on the horse's back even in his weak condition We had crossed the forest and were riding now in bright moonlight Around midnight we crossed the two rivers and entered Hastinapura

As I entered the city boundary, I turned and warned the horsemen in strong terms, "Take care. Nothing that happened in the forest must reach the ears of the palace people. You can go!"

22

"The Maharaja wishes to see you." The chief minister Vrishavarman was standing in front of me early in the morning.

"Why has the chief minister of the Kauravas come personally to deliver this message? Do the attendants spend all their time gobbling food in the kitchen?"

"No. I have come to express appreciation and gratitude. You were responsible for saving the life of Prince Duryodhana yesterday. All honour to your courage!" He said this, waving his hands.

"Chief minister, who has told you this?" I said this strongly, with the intention of making every word strike hard.

"The Prince himself," he replied in a soft voice.

"Fine. I am going to him. Please drink some milk before you go." Knowing that my harsh words were used fruitlessly, I said this in as gentle a tone as possible. Mrinal brought a silver glass of milk and fruits in a golden tray and placed them before him. I went to the dressing-room to change into my courtier's robes. I could not fathom why the Maharaja needed my presence so early in the morning.

Immediately on dressing, I followed the chief minister. Maharani Duhshala Devi's royal quarters lay on the way. She had bathed early and was drying her wet tresses, standing on the balcony. Her maid, who was combing her hair, must have informed her of our arrival. Both quickly entered the palace. The princess had recently come from her in-laws in order to take part in the spring festival.

As I passed her palace door, I felt my feet touch some object. In her hurry, the maid had left the comb behind. I picked it up. It had very fine teeth; it was made of hard shisham wood. I ran my finger casually over it to feel the sharpness of the teeth. Then, replacing the comb on the ledge of the balcony, I hurried ahead to catch up with the chief minister.

As soon as he entered the Maharaja's palace, the chief minister clearly announced someone's arrival to the king with a discreet

cough The Maharaja recognised the cough signal Rolling his blind-from-birth eyes, he said, "Who is it? The chief minister? What happened?"

"Maharaja, the Raja of Anga has arrived I am going to the royal physician to see that the ointment is applied on Prince Duryodhana's leg "

"You may leave "

The chief minister went away For an instant there was total silence in the room

"You may sit, Raja of Anga," he said, indicating a seat

"I offer you my homage, Maharaja " I bent and sat down on the seat The day I had first come to Hastinapura, this Maharaja had fondly called me to his side and caressed my flesh-ear-rings He had at the proper time praised me and my bow-skills fulsomely before the assembly of illustrious Kaurava warriors He had raised his royal sceptre and permitted me to take part in the weapons' combat in the arena He was generous with charities from the royal treasury on the occasion of my wedding with Vrishali This was that Maharaja He had lavished the purest love on an insignificant person like me

"Why does the Maharaja need me?" I asked softly, glancing at his white beard

"Raja of Anga—"

"No, Maharaja, not Raja of Anga, but Karna," I interrupted

"Karna, I see a thin ray of hope because of your incomparable virtues Your modesty, your valour, your patience—all are as remarkable as your flesh-ear-rings. You have, in yesterday's hunt, given us incalculable help "

' What help, Maharaja? I don't see Duryodhana as any less than Shon "

"May your relationship with him grow! Give him the same help all his life that you gave him in yesterday's hunt The hope lies in your assistance, otherwise "

"Otherwise what, Maharaja?"

"The Pandavas will see to it that he is not alive after they return from their exile That is why my mind is shaking with fear I am thinking of granting them half the kingdom, and in that way find peace for myself "

"Pandava! Pandava! Just because they have taken a vow to kill Duryodhana, do you think, like everyone else, that they are

invincible? At the right time I will tell them straight, 'Duryodhana is the sharp sword in Karna's firm scabbard.' There was a time when I too felt that half the kingdom should go to them. But only force now can decide who will wield the sceptre of a kingdom that is neither theirs nor the Kauravas' by inheritance. The battlefield now will decide whose kingdom it is."

"No, Karna. Duryodhana by himself will not be able to deal with this fiery hatred of the Pandavas. Will you be at his side always, helping out with body, mind, and wealth?"

"Maharaja, I gave my word to Duryodhana a long time ago. Today I repeat this for your satisfaction. I will destroy the Pandavas in the forest of Dvaita before their strength has a chance to grow."

"Karna, I can't believe that you are the son of Adhiratha when I hear such bold decisions from you. I cannot believe that Radha is your mother."

"No, Maharaja, I *am* their son, and proud of it— because father is not the charioteer you think he is. He is a direct descendant of Maharaja Yayati."

"What are you saying, Karna! Your father Adhiratha, a descendant of Maharaja Yayati!" He paused a while, then added gravely, "In that case, you are the only Kaurava after Grandsire Bhishma. Karna, if it is indeed as you say, I will always respect your statement." He rose from his seat.

"Yes, Maharaja, I'm saying the truth. That is why the question of compromising with the Pandavas does not arise. May I have your leave to go? I have to perform my daily morning rituals." I rose and paid him my respects.

"You can go," he said, raising his hand.

I came out of the palace. I glanced in the direction of Duhshala Devi's palace to see if the comb was still on the ledge. It was gone.

I returned to my palace, wondering how the Pandavas would be induced to battle in Dvaita forest. Supriya was handing over my hunt-soiled clothes to a maid for washing. Picking up a shawl, she said teasingly, "There are blood spots on this shawl. Did you carry the dead deer yourself?"

"No, this is not deer blood."

"Whose then?"

"Do I *have* to answer this?"

"You don't *have* to tell me. I know they are the python's."

"Who told you that?" I had heard that a woman could not keep secrets, but this was my first experience of how easily a woman could ferret out secrets from others.

"Maharani Bhanumati," she replied, smiling. So it wasn't untrue that all women are indeed under the spell of other women. Duryodhana—Bhanumati—that was how the story of the python had travelled to Supriya's ears. In a single day the entire palace would be awash with the news. Many now would sing excessive praises in my honour, as if I had overturned the Himalayas! I would now have to listen day and night, here and everywhere, to something that I loathed to hear.

The maid left with the clothes. I approached Supriya, looked into her large black eyes and said, "Supriya, the Maharani told you this because you were once close to her. But you are now my wife, not her to-be-confided-in friend. You will have to do exactly as I tell you."

"Meaning? You mean I haven't till now done exactly what you wanted me to?"

"No. But please don't repeat to anyone else what Bhanumati has told you. Understand? Swear by my flesh-ear-rings! Not one word of this must reach Vrishali's ears."

"Your order has my revered assent!" she said, touching my flesh ear-rings.

"*Ka-ka*!" Exactly at that time Minakshi entered and called me. Her mother—Shon's wife Meghamala—was upbraiding her with glaring looks because she had the strange idea that our privacy was being disturbed. She had entered holding Minakshi's arm, and she turned to leave, still holding on to her daughter. Meghamala was the perfect wife for Shon. She made it a point to see that no one was inconvenienced because of her. To stop her I called out to Minakshi: "Minu!"

Both paused. Shouting "*Kaka!*" Minakshi, whom I had cuddled from babyhood, ran towards me. She was a sweet eight-year old, as pure as a fountain. She clutched my fingers with her tiny hands and said, "*Kaka*, will you come to the village temple?"

"Temple? Minu, my place of worship is on the bank of the Ganga, this time every day. Don't you know?" I couldn't make out why she insisted on going to a temple, so I looked for clarification at Supriya.

"We're both going to the temple," explained Supriya She caught Minakshi's hand and looked at Meghamala

"Why?" I asked as I released my fingers from Minakshi's grasp

"Meghamala has taken a vow for the welfare of your dear brother The completion ceremony of the vow is today, at the temple of Uma My brother-in-law Shon is really a lucky man!" she laughed, glancing in Meghamala's direction

"Excellent! How diligent you are in the service of your husband, Meghamala! Shon is very lucky indeed Look at me—I have two wives—and yet—" I joked, hoping to silence Supriya

"How does one take a vow for an actual god? Which other god is there?" Supriya replied, with bowed head, leaving me answer-less

It is said that women have blind faith This is completely false They are excessively commonsensical In order to find the Supreme God, philosophers like Ashvatthaman run after the unmanifested, but practical ladies like Supriya find the limitless Divinity in their husbands Each individual has a different view of God Ashvatthaman had stressed this point to me repeatedly—and I had accepted it But after hearing Supriya's view I experienced its full truth There is a great deal of difference between the male and the female conceptions of God When he sees no way out, the male glances up at the vast and empty sky for comfort But the female at such a time looks with bowed head at the solid green earth This is the basic variance the male is attracted always to the abstract, the female always to the concrete The male ideal resides in the sky, the female in the earth

Supriya was wearing a new silk sari She and Meghamala made their way to the temple of Uma They touched my feet Little Minakshi stood beside them Her mother Meghamala chided her and ordered her to touch my feet with her forehead I lifted Minakshi up by her arms and smelt her small forehead I thought *Life should be as simple and pure as Minakshi*

All three left the palace My back longed for the rays of the sun and would not let me be at peace in the palace I also went out with a change of clothes

23

I was now forced to divulge to Duryodhana what I couldn't tell him during the hunt The Pandavas were a thorn in the mind of the

Maharaja—and as for my mind, it was all here and there, confused, fluttering like a red sheldrake trapped in a submarine fire The Pandavas—and only the Pandavas—were responsible for the insult that had shrouded my life's sky with ink-black clouds What Ashvatthaman had said was true The smooth flow of blood of childhood had coagulated into a hard clot How even my straight gait would probably appear to the world as crooked So wasn't walking crooked the right thing to do now? My mind was now devoid of all feelings for the Pandavas Whichever way, it was time now to put them in their place—and Shakuni's clear schemes of doing this appealed to me It was not possible for Duryodhana to rule the kingdom as long as the Pandavas dangled a sword above his head Duryodhana was no rishi dedicated to the holy fire of *yajna* rituals

Soon after returning from my *arghya*-offering, I sent word to him by Prabhanjana "I have some important things to discuss" —immediately after hearing this, he left the royal physician standing and, hurriedly bandaging his wounded leg, sped like a hawk to meet me I was impressed by the determined swiftness of his gait the very first time I laid eyes on him His determination did not always end up in right decisions—but he alone among the Kauravas and Pandavas had this tremendous resoluteness In my opinion there were only two who deserved to be given the title of Raja—one was Duryodhana, the other Sri Krishna

"How are you, Raja of Anga?" he greeted me, easily resting his mace beside a stone horse He wiped the beads of sweat off his forehead with his shawl, it was the sultry month of Vaisakha

"Duryodhana !" Thinking I should say something, I opened my mouth But Prabhanjana stood there, as always, like a stone statue I glanced at him, and stopped I didn't want my words to be heard by anyone except Duryodhana

"Prabhanjana!" Duryodhana's voice crackled like lightning The stony servant seemed to disintegrate The two of us were left to ourselves

"Duryodhana, is it true what Grandsire Bhishma says, that you are afraid of the Pandavas?" I asked

"Karna, don't I know how fond Bhishma is of the Pandavas? It's a prejudice he's had for ages I don't take his word for even a cowrie worth any more His views have led the kingdom of Hastinapura to its present helpless condition—an easy prize for the most powerful "

"And to obtain that prize are you going to wait endlessly for the other Kaurava warriors to support you?"

"No. But I have given this a great deal of thought, and I see no other way out. Where is that massive rope with which I can bind the Meru-mountain they call Bhima?"

"Why worry about that? I have decided to attack the Pandavas tomorrow itself in the Dvaita forest. If you don't want to join, send at least your army to reinforce my soldiers. Not just Bhima, Karna will wipe out all five Pandavas. If you find this hard to believe, then ..."

"I believe you only too well. Don't I announce everywhere that Karna and Duryodhana are two sides of the same royal coin? And isn't that the truth? I also would like to do what you have planned, but I don't think the Pandavas are spoiling for a fight."

"Why not? If they are really brave, they won't refuse a challenge."

"It's not that. As soon as they hear of our army's movements, they'll withdraw from Dvaita and enter some other forest. There's only one way we can get them to fight."

"How? You don't mean a duel?"

"No. Karna, they'll never agree to a duel with you. There is only one way. A man gets irritable when poverty afflicts him. And at that time if a spectacle of riches is presented before him, he'll go wild with anger."

"Meaning? To work him up you'll go and exhibit your wealth in that animal-infested dense forest?"

"Yes, it will be indeed an exhibition. But an exhibition of lovely maids all decked in gold ornaments. My brothers will indulge in water-sports with those maids in front of the Pandavas—and then, even if she ignores the others, Draupadi will angrily tell Bhima, 'The maids who yesterday were pressing my feet are today all dressed up and playing water-games. Rather than let me see this, why don't you lock me up in the thatched hut and set fire to it?' The only person likely to get roused by this reproach is Bhima, and he's stupid enough to let loose his wrath on the maids."

"Duryodhana, you're right. Bhima will come running. I'll drench all the low-lying ground around the lake with his hot blood. Cracking Satyasena's crop, I'll tell him, 'Today I have taken the whip in my hand in real earnest, and lashed it on the back of the wild horse that you are.'"

"Raja of Anga, this is the easiest task for you. That's why I am not taking anyone but you on this unpublicised trip. To meet any

unforeseen eventuality, we'll have some armed soldiers on foot and some on horse This is the right thing to do The maids accompanying us will be all from Indraprastha Otherwise how do you expect the fire of Draupadi's anger to flare up?"

"King, I was beginning to believe that you followed only Uncle Shakuni's instructions, but today I have discovered that you have ideas of your own Very original ideas—and intelligent ones "

"Life is an arena of plans and counter-plans All of Hastinapura is convinced that Uncle Shakuni tricked Raja Yudhishthira out of his kingdom, but does it ever occur to them that Yudhishthira could not have sat down to gamble with the intention of losing? What if *we* had lost? Would the Pandavas have continued to respect us?"

"No, king! No more recallings of that gambling episode! No more discussions of the dice game!"

I felt a sharp causeless pain stab my chest Something was pricking me, upsetting me It seemed I was travelling further and further away from the light Draupadi! That three-syllabled word plunged inside me like a three-headed arrow No, no more mention of that name! No more heaps of discarded dresses!

"I must leave now The royal physician must be waiting for me," he said, rising from his seat and looking at his feet

As I gazed at his departing figure, I remembered the day of the contest in the arena An exact duplicate of that anger and jealousy flared in every pore of his body Years pass Man continues to seek security in wealth, marriage, society, and so many other things But his nature—his nature remains the same Some things change-but not his basic character

He left, and my mind began whirling like his mace All that I was doing—was it right? Was it right to go on this quiet trip in order to duel with the Pandavas? Was I deteriorating step by step towards self-ruin?

Well, if I was—what was so wrong about it? Didn't Sri Krishna himself, on the pretext of begging alms, advise Bhima to destroy Jarasandha? The Pandavas and Karna—how long could this contest remain undecided? There had to be a limit to it somewhere! I wasn't a Pitamaha like Bhishma nor a chief advisor like Vidura to see things happening without doing anything I had chosen the forest of Dvaita, because that was the only way open to me

24

Hundreds of giggling, bedecked maids wound their way to the forest of Dvaita, accompanied by Prabhanjana Many curiously asked Prabhanjana where such a throng of ornamented palace maids, specially selected for their beauty, could be going He parried all such enquiries with cursory, diversionary answers But at the main gate he was met by Pitamaha Bhishma, returning from his daily morning rituals And he had to speak the truth, which he did with consummate skill

"They are going to the forest of Dvaita for water sports The heat of summer is unbearable The order has come from Prince Duryodhana "

"But why the forest of Dvaita? Go, tell Duryodhana to meet me soon " Grandsire Bhishma was getting on in years The rope had burnt, but the twist of authority remained He summoned Duryodhana

"Duryodhana, where are all these pretty palace maids going ?" he asked, lifting his white eyebrows, as soon as Duryodhana arrived

"To the forest of Dvaita, for water-games "

"But why the forest of Dvaita specially ? Why not the forest of Khandava, or Varanavata ?"

"Oh, no special reason There have been water sports earlier at the other two places The forest of Dvaita is known for its scenic splendour, so we chose it this time "

"Take note the Pandavas are living in that forest Don't go and create trouble with them—or you'll find a watery death awaiting you at the hands of dice-demented Bhima Go, but be careful "

Shrugging his shoulders, Duryodhana emerged from the Grandsire's residence, like a crushed snake His ruddy face was creased with wrinkles, like the waters of a lake obscured by lotus roots

"Why, what happened?" I asked him, noticing his displeasure

"I can't make out why, in his declining years, the Grandsire has to abandon all his meditation and *tapasya*, his charity and dharma, his puja and pious recitation, and let his thoughts hover round the Pandavas all the time He tried to frighten me with threats of what Bhima will do, and he's ordered me not to go anywhere near the Pandavas "

"He was always biased in favour of the Pandavas, he is that way now, and he always will be Are you a raja or not—do you have any authority to do anything at all?"

"Karna, what Duryodhana decides once, he decides once for all Even if death happens to be wandering on the same road, it does not matter Arishtasena, order the horsemen to leave for the forest of Dvaita by the secret route from the palace " He said this, pointing in the direction of the Dvaita forest Head bowed, Arishtasena ran towards the stables

The next instant we saw, like a flock of *dhanchari* birds, four or five hundred horsemen gallop from the stables along the secret route to the Dvaita forest We observed this from the balcony A cloud of hoof-dust vanished along the Ganga, reflected in the waters We came down the palace stairs

Holding the reins, I of my favourite horse Vayujit, and Duryodhana of his, we leapt up on their backs As soon as we crossed the boundary walls, we decided to race them like the wind

Vayujit, with his neck gracefully curved like a swan's, welcomed the first rays of the sun as if he was waiting for his master to start the journey His white mane, so lovely that it shamed even the long tresses of a beautiful girl, waved attractively as he galloped He was responsive to the minutest vibration of the breeze, his ears were cocked, fully alert He was the finest of the palace animals Uncle Shakuni had brought him specially from Gandhara I had chosen him for myself because of his excellence I had mounted his splendid back and ridden him on many occasions That horse was connected with many bittersweet memories for more than half of my life Animals are more reliable and loyal than even humans—this had been proved to me time and again

Smoothly, swaying rhythmically, he led me out of the ramparts I took silent leave with my eyes of Supriya who stood at her window wondering where I was bound Just as he was about to cross the threshold of the main gate, Vayujit's two front hooves twisted and he fell with a thud, his chest hitting the ground This had never happened before With one hand I pulled at the reins while steadying my crown with the other The mocking sandpiper of doubt shrilled raucously near the river bank of my mind, "An ill omen?" *Chhee!* Flinging the stone of patience at it, I exorcised it Like a branch of a tree swinging back to its original position after being pulled and released, Vayujit promptly stood up again He

shivered briefly, swished his tail, and snorted. I lightly brushed my spur against his belly, because I wanted to catch up with Duryodhana. In keeping with his name, Vayujit the "Wind-Conqueror", began his triumph over the wind by galloping swiftly.

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The thick verdure of the Dvaita forest came within view. The womb of that massive forest, appearing so tranquil from a distance, harboured countless cruel beasts. We alighted from our horses, and proceeded on foot, holding the reins. The journey and the body-blistering heat of summer had bathed with sweat everyone's royal vesture. We paused for a while to rest under a huge *asan* tree with a stream nearby. Tying the reins to the trunk, Duryodhana said, "Karna, do you feel these four or five hundred horsemen are sufficient?"

"We haven't come here to fight a battle. Today we'll obviously have just a duel—not with one but with all five of them," I replied as I entered the stream and sprinkled cool water on my face. Driving his horse across the shallow water of the stream, Prabhanjana approached us from the opposite bank. As he raced his horse, the furrows that creased his forehead gave the impression he was under the shadow of a great fear. He came near and, without alighting, holding the reins as well as his breath, he stood in the centre of the stream and shouted in terror, "Maharaja, Gandharva ladies are sporting in the lake, and there's a free-for-all going on between them and our maids, with neither side giving in."

"Come, Prabhanjana, lead the way. We'll follow," Duryodhana raised his hand and ordered him back.

Our horses splashed through the stream and dashed off in the direction of the Dvaita forest. The overhanging boughs struck against our bare arms. Trailing the hooves of Prabhanjana's horse, leaving behind many tortuous paths, we came to the lake in the middle of the forest. What we saw in front of us did not make sense to either of us. The Gandharva ladies and the maids were standing in rows near the lake, terrified. Transfixed and agape. Our horsemen were engaged in a deadly combat with thousands of Gandharva soldiers in the open area. They were oblivious of their limited numbers and their abilities. They probably never had the

chance anyway In the centre of the Gandharva army, a tall and handsome leader stood flashing his sword like lightning and roaring encouragement to his soldiers

"Chitrasena!" Duryodhana spluttered, seeing him It was indeed the Gandharva leader Chitrasena Not just the forest of Dvaita—his reputation had spread so hugely in all the neighbouring territories that no rakshasa in the forest dared so much as even approach him Our maids had provoked his beloved wives and thus invited themselves into a whole heap of trouble

Every second the Gandharva forces were inexorably moving in on our valiantly resisting soldiers

"Duryodhana, smash that formation!" I said this to him on my left while I attacked the Gandharva forces with my sword on the right There was no time to think things out

I pierced their ranks in a swift sortie Lunging fiercely, I succeded in breaking through the Gandharva circle and freeing my soldiers, but in no time at all other Gandharvas, burning with belligerence, had re-formed their broken ranks Suddenly I was face to face with Chitrasena, roaring his war-cries Flushed with rage, he looked like a veritable blood-red flame-of-the-forest

"Karna, retreat with your soldiers, or be ready to die here," he screamed, flaring his neck-veins

"Chitrasena, I am Karna Gusts of wind do not move hills and mountains Prepare yourself!" I was angered by his arrogant pronouncements

He bore down on me furiously As we clashed, the two groups of warring soldiers separated For some time we kept clanging sword against sword, and sparks flew right and left Chitrasena's sword kept brushing against my body repeatedly, but not a single drop of blood oozed to quench his blood-thirst The grass under our feet was crushed completely Stopping suddenly, Chitrasena addressed his soldiers who were standing and observing the duel, "This impenetrable-armoured warrior is Karna of Hastinapura He cannot be killed in sword fight, bow-duel, and mace fight Surround him and catch him alive "

There was no point in staying there any more

"Horsemen, return at once with the maids!" Before their soldiers could surround me, I mounted Vayujit who was swishing his tail and grazing, and shouted this order Each horseman lifted a maid up on his steed, and all galloped behind me Thousands of

Gandharva soldiers released their final volley of weapons on us Their accurate aim knocked many of our horsemen down The survivors galloped for their lives Once again, the hanging boughs struck hurtingly against us as we left paths and bypaths behind us The horses were speeding, the dust billowing, but my mind was a medley of confusion Was this a flight after defeat on the battlefield, or a tactical retreat to offer protection? I couldn't make out what With what hopes I had come from the palace, and what was I returning with? Was the stumbling of Vayujit at the threshold of the main entrance the first sign of the beginning of my defeat and failure? What was it? Defeat? Flight? Retreat? Wasn't it correct to retreat if one did not have sufficient forces? Supposing Chitrasena had captured me? Who then would have retaliated against Arjuna for killing my son Sudamana? Who was my enemy—Arjuna or Chitrasena? I passed myself through a sharp analysis It was essential that I remain alive in order to slash Arjuna's throat With each hoof-beat of Vayujit many curves of thought slipped behind me The secret journey, to Karna's eyes, was beginning to look like a malign manoeuvre Life's horse was stumbling on the doorstep of Fame Defeat! My first defeat! The result of circumstances Whatever the reason, to retreat is to admit defeat Karna—defeat! Defeat-Karna! Nothing seemed to make sense Or if it did, my mind refused to accept it What would Duryodhana think? How would he greet me? Duryodhana! The instant I recalled him, I tugged at Vayujit's reins We had arrived near the stream where we had earlier paused to rest I turned to look behind me Duryodhana was nowhere to be seen among the fleeing throng A tremor of fear raced through my mind Could it be that Duryodhana was trapped alone among the Gandharva soldiers in the confusion of the battle? What if he was hurt? How could I show my face in Hastinapura?

"Arishtasena, the king has been left behind Order the horses to turn back " I raised my hand and pointed to the forest of Dvaita

"Maharaja, the Gandharva soldiers are countless We should go to the capital and fetch reinforcements Or else—"

"Or else what?"

"Or else none will be left alive to tell this in Hastinapura "

What he said was correct I could not decide what to do If we went back to the Dvaita forest, the likelihood was that none would make it back to Hastinapura If we went to the capital, that was

quite a few *yojanas* away I sat down on the black stone under the *asan* tree near the stream Nothing could be done unless we sent Arishtasena to bring reinforcements from the capital There was no sense either in accompanying him to the city and inviting ridicule I ordered Arishtasena to hurry to the capital I was neither in the Dvaita forest nor in the capital—I was in Trishanku's predicament of hanging midspace Each second counted My mind's catapult kept hurling thought-stones all around I sat, pressing my head tightly Helpless! Helplessness, like a cruel cat, makes a mouse of a man It won't let him die, and it doesn't make him live Without warning, today, it had assumed the form of Chitrasena and confronted me

Quite some time had elapsed since Arishtasena left There was no trace of Duryodhana There was no point now in waiting I rose, held Vayujit's reins, and decided to enter the Dvaita forest alone I had no intention of taking any horseman with me to the very threshold of death Karna was also ready to accept any death that was about to strike Duryodhana at the hands of the Gandharvas I leapt on my horse without once looking back, ready to enter Dvaita My mind was now composed and determined No vacillation any more Vayujit also trotted ahead with slow and sure steps He was on the point of entering a thick clump of shrubbery when Duryodhana stepped out Both his hands were tied fast with the tendrils of *rameta*-creepers I was seeing him for the first time with head bowed There are times when fact is far more fearsome than fiction His royal vestments were in tatters He shuffled wearily as he came forward, like a lion shorn of his mane

"King!" Seeing him safe, I leapt down from my horse joyfully, and embraced him But he did not raise his head Swiftly I untied the creepers around his hands, and said to console him, "I returned with the sole idea of finding and freeing you " Still his lotus-face refused to bloom His head, drooping like a drenched branch, did not lift He stood in front of me, silent, like a stone statue Duryodhana! He stood there, this great mace-wielding punisher of a warrior kingdom, like a lotus flower broken at the stem Did even he start having doubts about the loyalty of my friendship? Did he think that Karna had fled?

"Raja of Anga, I am not going back to Hastinapura I am going to give up my life under this very tree " Every word of his sounded like a heavy feet-binding chain

"Why, what's happened? A raja's life is not a dinghy to be floated whenever you like down the river of death Have you forgotten your royal dharma?"

"What royal dharma? What king? What king is it who cannot live with dignity?"

"But what is the matter? If Chitrasena has taken advantage of your being alone and insulted you, I—"

"No, Karna Had Chitrasena severed and crushed my head underfoot, I would have gladly accepted that honourable death in battle But—but I am here in this despicable state after begging for my life at the hands of my enemy More horrible than death to a brave warrior is the death of bravery I am not a raja, not a mace-wielding hero, not even a plain soldier who lives with dignity The creepers you untied just now—my life is not worth even the leaves on them "

"Why are you going on like this? Who has granted you the gift of your life? And how did you get to accept it?"

"As soon as you left, I found myself alone The Gandharva army was all around me Thousands of Gandharvas attacked me simultaneously They snatched away my weapons, trussed my arms, and made me captive Most of them then left the lakeside, shouting victory slogans Chitrasena and four to five hundred foot-soldiers were taking me to some unknown destination, when "

"What happened?"

"It was Arjuna He challenged Chitrasena without thinking twice, and and the arrows from his Gandiva bow obscured the entire lake surface Chitrasena left me and fled My hands were tied, or I would have stopped Chitrasena and attacked Arjuna myself After Chitrasena had gone, he came and stood in front of me 'I have been instructed by Yudhishthira to free you See that you don't set foot in the Dvaita forest again ' Flushed with his false victory, he said this arrogantly, as if the Dvaita forest was the property of his father Accompanying him was an ugly-looking son of a rakshasa He has deposited me here My liberator Arjuna left me trussed as I was in order to humiliate me Tell me, Karna, how can I show my royal face in the city now? How can a broken-winged Garuda, king of birds, aspire to a high peak? I am not going to move from here You can go " The wounds of his mind oozed from his mouth in blood-words Never had he faced such a

crushing disillusion His wrists had become black with the creepers, and his mind black with Arjuna's words Truly, only he who has the mind of an emperor like Duryodhana can understand what fatal feelings must have passed through Duryodhana when he accepted the gift of his life from an enemy I had no words to offer him the proper consolation

"You must return to the city Even the Sun-God who releases such an outburst of dazzling energy has to accept an occasional eclipse Haven't you seen how clouds, which are born from the ocean with intoxicating arrogance, pour down showers of rain-mercy on the very same ocean? Who grants life-gift to who ? Has the world considered Krishna a cowardly fugutive because he ran away from Mathura to Dvarika when he was harassed by the seventeen attacks of Jarasandha? Has the world considered Jamadagni's son Parashurama as a defeated warrior because Grandsire Bhishma humbled him in battle? Haven't you heard of Indra, the raja of the gods, who was unable to save himself from defeat and whom Maharaja Nahusha yoked to a palanquin? Kshatriyas don't die sitting in one place They are born to sacrifice their life-energy on the blazing battlefield of life Here, hold this " I handed him the reins of the horse brought by Arishtasena

In a short time Duryodhana recovered

"Karna, the citizens call you Suta-putra, the son of a charioteer But your words give a very different impression I will not perish here like an ant, like an insect Come " He leapt up on the horse I breathed a sigh of relief, and mounted Vayujit We galloped in the direction of the city Dust swirled as their hooves struck the earth, and was absorbed in the thick verdure of the trees and shrubs I felt at peace I wasn't troubled by the bitterness of defeat, the pain of flight, or the hollow consolation of a rationalised retreat I was as calm as I had been the first time we returned from the hunt In fact, a strange, unimaginable sense of security and well-being possessed me, for the expedition had indeed finally ended

As soon as we reached the city, some tattling maid or other was sure to come out with, "The Raja of Anga fled from battle!" But even that did not worry me My mind told me that this expedition could be considered as one of the numerous testing experiences of life—an unforgettable test—a test that came utterly unexpected and unannounced

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"Maharaja, it is the desire of Grandsire Bhishma that you be present in the assembly hall for a meeting " A servant of the chief advisor Vidura stood in front of me, with bowed head, holding something written on birch-parchment Hardly a day had passed since we returned to the capital from the forest of Dvaita, and here was this message, from Grandsire Bhishma himself, to attend a meeting called by him Not message—an order, a summons to a meeting called not by the Maharaja but by the Grandsire And nothing was written on the birch-parchment to indicate what the meeting was about For an instant feelings of anger bubbled inside me I held the parchment at an angle in order to tear it—and as I did so, I saw the gold-embroidered royal insignia of the Sun flash on the silk cloth It was the respected royal seal of the Kauravas, so impressive that all heads bowed automatically and traditionally before it No matter how important the person, he has to bow before the sign of royalty I changed my mind

"You can go " He had brought the birch-parchment message in a gold salver In that salver was a ball of wax on a wood base I lifted the ball of wax and, to indicate receipt of the message, I pressed the signet ring on my forefinger on it Replacing the ball of wax in the salver, he bowed and took leave

The first royal assembly called by Grandsire Bhishma! And a special summons to me! What was going on in the Grandsire's mind? As I donned my royal vestments, my mind kept running in so many directions—like water off a peak cascading wherever it finds convenient outlets I couldn't make out any reason at all for calling the assembly

As always, before leaving for the assembly I touched Radhamata's feet I entered the packed hall with Duryodhana All the Kaurava warriors were present, but none seemed to know the reason for the meeting As soon as the hall was filled, the minister Vrishavarman, as was the custom, inaugurated the session "Today's royal assembly has been summoned by Pitamaha Bhishma He wishes to give some Kaurava warriors serious warning of an impending crisis Every word of his deserves respectful attention from all Whatever he says should be heeded carefully by all warriors present, for his aim is not to belittle anyone This is not the time to launch into a panegyric on the sky-shattering exploits

of Grandsire Bhishma or on his unparalleled sacrifices for the kingdom of Hastinapura However, none should lose sight of the fact that our kingdom has prospered as a result of his moral uprightness, which is as straight as a flagpole He is the eldest person in this assembly The experienced advice of elders has a therapeutic value It has the power to root out the unhealthy urges of the mind Hatred is one such disease of the mind Even the magnificent kingdoms of gods have been known to be razed to the dust because the gods indulged in malady-breeding, mirage-making hatred Mutual quarrelling is like biting one's own tongue Those who are wise and see clearly, quickly and cleverly release the bitten tongue Love and discipline are required, because hate leads to guile, guile leads to anger, and anger to war Wars are no answers to problems, on the contrary, they give rise to new and more complex problems That is why the only real dharma is love and discipline Today we should open our eyes and learn to follow love and discipline, failing which failing which the fire of hate will flare up on all sides and consume everybody That is why all should listen calmly and attentively today to the important and profound advice of the Pitamaha " He ran his tongue over his dry lips and sat down Each word of his made a telling point He had never before made such a soul-touching speech

For an instant there was an awe filled silence Everyone could guess what the Grandsire was going to say

Grandsire Bhishma stood up Today he had from the beginning *taken charge of the royal sceptre instead of* passing it on to the hand of the Maharaja His frame was not trembling, as it did earlier He stood as firm as the highest peak of the Himalaya And soon enough a Ganga and a Yamuna of words began streaming from the peak on the assembled warriors

' Heroes! This is the first assembly I have called in my life—and it is likely to be the last I am not facing you as a warrior of the Kaurava race, nor as the Grandsire, nor as the disciple Bhishma of Parashurama, nor even as a citizen of the kingdom from which I never took any advantage On the contrary, like you, I am here as an ordinary mortal on the battlefield of life, with tears of victory in one eye and tears of defeat in the other Unlike you, I have witnessed far more conflicts because of my age My contemporaries have all disappeared on the journey that never ends, and I have stayed behind only for one reason—that I should

communicate to you in language that you can understand the idea that Nature has fashioned the mind of man in such wondrous and complex variety That day has now come

"Keep well in mind that selfishness always makes a man very cruel Harassed by hunger, a famished lion will attack any creature to appease his instinct But he will never kill a fellow lion However, a man, impelled by selfishness, does not think twice before despatching not one, not two, but hundreds of thousands of fellow-beings to the jaws of death Man has no right to brand a lion as vicious, when he himself is the most savage of all God's creatures Yet learned people consider man as cultured Man is indeed superior— but when? Only when he forgets his selfishness and sacrifices each drop of his blood for others Or else, no matter how much he goes about trumpeting the virtues of *dharma*, good fortune, politics and the rest, he is not worth even two cowries The worst curse on man is the curse of selfishness

"Trapped in terrifying selfishness, man abandons hard work and resorts to deceit Imagine a scene in which all humans in the world give up hard work and, to pursue their evil designs, live by elevating selfishness as the only intelligent policy What will you see? Only a hell—the hell that man makes of this beautiful earth Such selfishness must at the right time be condemned That is why I have called this assembly

'The future of a kingdom's subjects is dependent on their raja It is your misfortune and my misfortune—everyone's misfortune—that such a deceitful selfishness characterises our kingdom today Who can blame who? All have gone astray The primary and unforgivable blame is your raja's—Dhritarashtra's He has completely forgotten the fact that his dear brother Pandu carried the kingdom to the pinnacle of glory by his world conquest He did not once use a single word to stop his sons I had heard that greed for power makes men blind, but your raja is a living embodiment of the opposite truth Unfortunately, this blind raja has developed vision as a result of his lust for power Pushing his son, he sees impossible dreams of his son's coronation in broad daylight as actual fact Glory to his royal determination!

"The chief minister Vrishavarman said that the words of elders have a therapeutic value—but I will add that, no matter how good the medicine is, it is fruitless unless the patient takes care to follow the treatment meticulously I ask in straight and clear language—

Will Dhritarashtra open his inner eye, or not? Will his son Duryodhana now follow the path of royal duty, or not? Will all of you here care to deliberate with composed minds on the difference between truth and untruth?

"Do any of you recall how many scenes of pride have been witnessed by the royal assembly hall in which we are today gathered? This Hastinapura of Maharaja Hasti has been the proud-headed leader of all Aryavarta for hundreds of years. This throne of monarchs has been graced by strong and noble-hearted rulers like Kuru the son of Tapati, Viduratha the son of Shubhangi, Anashnana the son of Sampriya, Parikshit the son of Amrita, Bhimasena the son of Suvesha, Pratipa the son of Sukumari, and Maharaja Shantanu the son of my revered grandmother Sunanda. The fanfare of their fame has been increased by the world-conquest of Pandu. And today! Today the situation is that every incident makes us hang our heads in shame. The wicked insult meted to Draupadi in this very hall—what kind of expression of manliness was that? What royal dharma is it that justifies the swallowing of the entire kingdom established by the Pandavas by a simple throw of dice and drives them out to beg for food from door to door? Even after all this, Duryodhana refuses to rest content. Has Dhritarashtra uttered one syllable against this? No. That is why I have to say all this, almost out of despair.

"Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Vikarna, Chitrasena, Duhsaha, Jaya, Satyavrata, Durmarshana, Purumitra, Vivamshati—all you mighty chariot-warrior hero sons of Dhritarashtra! Shakuni, Ashvatthaman, Jayadratha, and other wonderful warriors! Are we going to draw a line somewhere or no?

"Duryodhana, it is better that you acquire glory as a mace-wielding hero than that people should brand you a huge tree of hatred. Remove all thoughts of the Pandavas from your mind, because only yesterday you escaped from the forest of Dvaita by the skin of your teeth as a result of Arjuna's intervention, not Karna's. The Gandharva Chitrasena has shredded all the plans with which you had proceeded to the forest of Dvaita. Karna fled from the field of battle. Your faith in Karna was misplaced, has Karna shown any glorious eye-opening exploit? Arjuna is an invincible archer. He has even subjugated Shiva himself who assumed the form of a hunter. He even overcame Varuna who became incensed at the time of the establishment of Indraprastha

in the Khandava forest—and he obtained from Varuna the Gandiva bow and a quiver of indestructible arrows It was Arjuna who pierced the fish target in the *svayamvara* of Draupadi—and only yesterday, jeopardising his own life, he freed you from the clutches of the Gandharva, and gave you a new lease of life It is not easy to defeat Arjuna The Karna you take such pride in is no match for Arjuna That is why I have not mentioned Karna in the list of the chariot-warriors and other heroes

"Prince, good or bad thoughts spring from the mind The whole world can be conquered easily at least once, but it is difficult to conquer the mind So, if you are a true warrior, first get over your hatred of Arjuna Drive out all greed for the kingdom The Pandavas and Kauravas have to stretch hands of cooperation to each other if they wish this kingdom to remain intact There is still time Order your general to persuade the Pandavas to return from the forest

"If this is not done, the cruel plans that you are formulating one by one to liquidate the Pandavas, impelled by greed to hold on to the royal sceptre, will have consequences that will fall on the lion hearted warriors who are gathered here today in hundreds A cow, a house, wealth, the earth— the lives of warriors are worth a thousand times more than any of these, because warriors are the ones responsible for the prosperity of the kingdom

"Duryodhana, you are taking all these brave men to the brink of the river of Death It was your idea to feed poison to Bhima It was your wicked plan to burn Kunti and her five Pandava sons in the lacquer hut in Varanavata The grand public show of generosity of granting the Khandava forest to the kingdom demanding Pandavas was also your idea The first hands to clap at the winning throw of dice by Shakuni were yours You were the mace wielding hero who chose to bare his thigh to virtuous Draupadi, the dust of whose feet deserves the homage of our heads You were the one who laughed and used your tongue to abuse the plight of sun radiant-pure Kunti—the same tongue that should be used for chanting mantras to the gods at the time of granting alms to the distressed And—and you were the one who yesterday took the hand of this lustre less son of a charioteer Karna in your hand, and decided to taunt the Pandavas with the help of the maids of Indraprastha—and you were the one who returned helpless after the effeminate water-sports, your hands trussed with creepers

"Duryodhana, Karna! If this royal sceptre can intoxicate and blind you and instigate you to the extent of playing repeatedly a wicked game of dice, the stakes being hundreds of lives of warriors, together with the future glory of the Kauravas, then in order to show how trivial this sceptre is when compared to their lives, I, Bhishma, son of Shantanu, will personally throw it away and prove my point in front of you and all this assembly of warriors."

Raising his hand, he tossed the golden sceptre in the centre of the hall. It clattered along the floor and came to rest at Duryodhana's feet. Duryodhana and the other warriors rose as if struck by lightning. I was the only one who remained seated, with a depressed mind. The tree-tall hero who had hurled the sceptre stood there, trembling. Drops of sweat gleamed in the furrows of his wrinkled forehead.

The contest in the arena, the piercing of the fish target in Kampilya, the killing of Shishupala in Indraprastha, and the disrobing of Draupadi in this very hall—none of these had so stirred me as what I saw today.

A ripple of thoughts swept through me as I watched the slowly rolling sceptre. I rushed forward, picked up the sceptre, and held it aloft. Mixed feelings bubbled out from the eyes of the gathering. What would I do next? What would be my next move?—they asked silently.

"Sit down!" I waved my command like a mace. They sat down again, like an ocean wave retreating. The blood in my veins coursed faster. The corners of my eyes were red like a ritual fire at a *yajna*. Someone was blowing a conch of words in the battlefield of my ears—someone was saying, in a swelling voice, "Karna is no match for Arjuna. Lustre-less, vanquished, fleeing Karna! Has Karna shown any glorious, eye-opening exploit? Arjuna is the invincible archer."

Placing one hand on my ear and waving my other raised hand, I shouted with all the strength I had, "I am not lustre-less. I did not flee the battle. I will show the Grandsire who declares 'Karna is no match for Arjuna' that in fact Arjuna is no match for Karna. If the number of battles won is the only test of heroism, I, the son of a charioteer, will make this royal sceptre rule all Aryavarta—I will do this, however, not as the Raja of Anga, nor as a friend of Raja Duryodhana, nor even as a warrior of this assembly of Kaurava

heroes I will make all the countries and kings whom the chief minister can name bow their heads before the holy sceptre that you see in front of you As soon as the monsoon rains give over, I will march out of the capital with this royal sceptre—on a world-conquest the likes of which have not been witnessed yet by anyone I will set foot again in Hastinapura, city of Maharaja Yayati, only after completing my mission of glory—failing which, I will sacrifice my life on the battlefield But I do not wish to be misunderstood—in front of all I declare very clearly that I will not in my intoxication of victory march against Sri Krishna's Mathura and Dvarika I am not announcing this out of fear of defeat or death, but I do not see any reason why I have to explain my decision Yes, it is true that this exception applies to Sri Krishna only Let no one in future make any comparisons between Karna and Arjuna The challenge that I threw in the contest is still valid Without Sri Krishna, Arjuna is like a broken sword Similarly, the accusations levelled by Grandsire Bhishma against Duryodhana are prejudiced How is it that the Grandsire conveniently overlooked the Bhima who in childhood dunked the heads of Duryodhana's four brothers till they almost drowned, on the pretext that he was playing water-games with them? Has he forgotten the mocking taunt hurled at me by Bhima in the arena when Bhima said, 'Hold a whip in your hand'? What happened to the Grandsire's sense of justice at the time of the Rajasuya Yajna when he ordered Prince Duryodhana to count and keep tally of the animals? Does he recall the words of Draupadi, 'Blind fathers breed blind sons'? And yesterday—yesterday it wasn't Arjuna who on his own saved Duryodhana from the Gandharva—Arjuna was merely following the orders of Yudhishthira Otherwise would he have cut the creepers that tied Duryodhana? It seems to me that a reconciliation of the Kauravas and the Pandavas is as impossible as a reconciliation of day and night

"Grandsire Bhishma says that this royal sceptre is a trivial thing In my opinion, this sceptre is greater even than the kingdom of heaven He himself fought a fierce battle with his guru Parashurama, son of Jamadagni, for establishing the spotless sway of this sceptre He might have forgotten this fact, but we—at least I—have not forgotten Being eldest of the elders, who can dispute the fact that Grandsire Bhishma will not be the first to bow before the royal sceptre of his ancestors?

"Thick webs of grass abound in forests But only *durva*-grass is offered to a deity Mountains there are many in this world, but the Himalayas remain the Himalayas Women there are many, but one touches the feet only of one's mother In Hastinapura are many warriors, but—but only Grandsire Bhishma has the courage to throw away the sceptre The sky is studded with many flaming bodies, but there is only one Sun-God Similarly, there is only one supreme sceptre—this one That is why I have come and announced my challenge of world-conquest by stepping forward and holding it aloft I will never allow it to fall again on the ground If such a situation should ever arise, sword will clash against sword, maces emit sparks, arrows fall in showers, chakra-missiles sweep the region, rivers of blood flow, but this royal sceptre will stay above them all, because it is the sceptre of the Kauravas, of Hastinapura, of our tradition That is why I have held it in my hands Grandsire Bhishma flung it away with the strength of despair, with the strength of certainty, and vowing by the grace of his feet, I will raise it as high as the sky, after the monsoon gives over " My body was trembling What I said, how I said it, how long—I had no idea My body seemed to be aflame

"Glory to Angaraja!"

"Victory to him!"

The assembly shook with the acclamations My hands trembled with my mixed feelings

"Quiet!" Someone touched my hand that held the sceptre It was Duryodhana With his other hand he was signalling everyone to be calm When they quietened, he said something important in a few words

"I will place four fully equipped *akshauhini* armies at the command of my dear friend Karna when he marches out on his mission of world-conquest This striking force of 87,480 chariots, and as many elephants, 206,440 superior horsemen, and 437,400 foot soldiers—making a total strength of 874,800 After this monsoon, the glory of the Kauravas will exceed whatever water there is in the rivers, it will swell like the ocean itself I dismiss for the first time—as the Grandsire summoned for the first time—this royal assembly All the illustrious invitees can leave now " He respectfully took the sceptre from my hand From now on it would remain in his hand

BOOK 7

SHON

1

Torrential rain deluged the ramparts, turrets, domes and spires of the capital With the onset of the monsoon, the open-air military displays with spears, javelins, maces and swords automatically stopped The daily routine slowed down Peasants could be seen going to the fields for sowing and ploughing in the morning and evening with small make-do umbrellas of *palasha*-leaves The rainy months of Ashada and Shravana passed Alluvial soil from the plains mixed muddily with the frothing waters of the Ganga Fine spray that scattered from the foaming waves of the Ganga washed clean the green leaves of rice plants on both banks My heart also brimmed with happiness when I heard of my valiant brother's vow to embark on a campaign of world-conquest The palace hummed with only one topic of discussion the World-Conquest of the Raja of Anga All were waiting for the Ganga's waters to subside My brother stood for hours on end near the window observing the Ganga's level going down steadily day by day In the furnaces of iron foundries, hundreds of ironsmiths busily fashioned sheaths, arrows, axes, javelins, swords and other war weapons Syces smeared preventive ointments on the hooves of the horses to guard against any outbreak of monsoon infections Shipwrights worked hard at building boats of tough *saga* timber I was in charge of looking after my brother's steed Vayujit

The months of Bhadrapada and Ashvina also passed The intensity of rainfall decreased considerably The heaving reservoir of the Ganga, having lovingly gifted its tumultuous waters to the ocean, became level once again Seedlings in the fields sprouted The drip-drop of rain ceased on tree leaves The whistling wind faded in the distance, as if seeking the source of its music The entire earth was dressed in the soft-green enchantment of new shoots The month of Kartika ended, and birds beat wings once again After the long absence of five months, the rays of the sun felt the white, clean tops of the palace again The rains were over Pigeons and *bharadvajas* circled once again near the laughing fields

One day brother and I went to inspect the level of the river It was possible now to ferry across in boats The horses in the stables neighed and scratched holes in the earth with their restless hooves The auspicious time of the world-conquest arrived The exact time of commencement was calculated by the royal astrologers The fifth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Margashirsha was chosen

On the fourth day of the bright fortnight all the warriors, soldiers, burden-bearers, and workers were ordered to be ready My mind was awash with eagerness Brother was about to embark on a mission of world-conquest! All of us used to crown him on a stone throne when he was young Indeed, he had become stone-firm and brought glory to the kingdom of Anga and now, now he was going to achieve his world conquest and sit on the love-throne of the hearts of all the warriors The Raja of Anga! Karna! *Chhee*! He was my Vasu-bhaiya Vasu-bhaiya would chew the rajas of the world like blades of grass between his teeth and force them into submission I was to be his charioteer in his world-subjugating campaign A hundred princes, Uncle Shakuni, Ashvatthaman, Jayadratha, the general—he was not taking the help of any, but venturing out alone, with one exception—me His relationship with me was something that stretched from birth to birth He had flesh-ear-rings, his body glowed golden, his cheeks were like red *gurahala* flowers, his eyes were deep dark-blue, and his teeth were enchanting white I was dark-complexioned, but I never even by mistake regretted this fact On the contrary, I had never forgotten the reassurence he once gave me in boyhood

He had said, "I will fly higher and still higher, like the king of birds Garuda, so high that you will not be able to even see me "

The mission of world-conquest was going to be his highest-flying adventure, because I was by now familiar with his determined nature All that he needed was an incentive to put his confidence in action And Grandsire Bhishma had provided proof of that in the royal assembly No one could now come in the way of his world conquest No matter what happened, he would stick by his resolve and return to Hastinapura only after he had succeeded in his mission of making the Kaurava sceptre dominate all Aryavarta The fourth night of the bright fortnight seemed to pass with the slowness of a whole yuga A warrior on the eve of battle is even more restless than a mother eager to meet her son, or a wife yearning for her husband

2

And so the epoch-making fifth day of the bright fortnight of Margashirsha arrived All were delighted by the good omen of a darshan of the *bharadvaja* birds Horsemen, elephant-warriors, foot-soldiers, chariot-heroes, and chariot-leaders gathered in the ranks on the ground outside the palace They would soon march through kingdom after kingdom The Raja of Anga was on the point of departing from the Hastinapura of the Kauravas on his plan of world-domination The two of us, Karna and Shon, who used to collect seashells to show as wealth to Radha-mata were now going to offer at her feet cart-loads of diamonds, rubies, pearls, cat's-eyes, onyx, and coral And yet she would surely repeat to Bhaiya, "Vasu, during this world-conquest, you didn't step in the Ganga, did you, Vasu?" We were simple folk we loved each other equally in poverty and prosperity

The soft blowing of trumpets from dawn onwards could be heard in every part of the palace The triangular royal silk flag of the Kauravas, which had been stored during the monsoon in a box—the same flag that had been scrupulously safeguarded since the reign of Nahusha—was now decorated with flower garlands by Vidura and hoisted atop the palace pinnacle The sun flooded the east, and the flag glowed in the bright light, fluttering in the breeze, as if surveying all the rajas in its sweep of vision and telling them "Be warned! The impenetrable-skin-armoured, flesh-ear-ringed hero of Hastinapura is on the march! Surrender or face death on the field—you have no other choice Be warned!"

Bhaiya woke at dawn and inspected the army He gave special instructions to the horsemen and the elephant-warriors regarding the crossing of the river He explained to the foot-soldiers how, after surrounding an elephant-formation, they should pierce their way through to attack the enemy's main body He told the army cooks to stress meat instead of rice He added that attention should be paid to the serving of the right amount of liquor after meals in order to keep the soldiers on their toes

Even a glimpse of him moved the soldiers tremendously As he walked down the ranks, some soldiers came forward and touched his golden, pointed feet with deep shraddha His lightest touch, a single word from him, even his physical nearness was an

overwhelming experience Merely the magnetic personality of a military leader is enough to impress and inspire the entire rank and file of an army

After the inspection, he proceeded alone to the Ganga to make the *arghya*-offering That was his life's vow Offering *anjali* with his hands and shraddha with his eyes to the rising sun, he returned soon to the palace The mandala of his face had the golden glow of a full blown sunflower The red of his cheeks shamed even the blood-red blossoms of the flame-of-the-forest His dark-blue eyes emitted the rays of his *arghya* piety His ear-rings shore like ripe *kokama*-fruits

The *purohita* consecrated him general of the army, as was the custom, by chanting mantras and sprinkling water from the holy rivers on his head Raja Duryodhana smilingly tied a garland of tuberoses on his wrist Guru Drona's son Ashvatthaman placed a specially crafted steel helmet on his head The soldiers showered *ananta, parijata,* champak and other flowers on their beloved general Dressed in steel coat-of-mail which covered his whole body, he visited every palace in the royal complex in order to receive the blessings of elders—Pitamaha Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Queen Mother Gandhari Devi, the seniormost minister Vidura, Guru Drona In front of all of them he bowed his head with humility and devotion to receive their blessing Finally he stood in front of the Queen Mother and father My sister-in-law Vrishali perrormed *arati* before us with glowing clay lamps With trembling fingers she placed kumkum tilaks on our foreheads As she sprinkled rice grains on our heads, her eyes became moist Dabbing them with her left hand which held a corner of her dress, she said softly, "I will need news of you every week' You are my brother in law *Devara*, see that this gets done "

' Vrishali, look after Supriya See that our sons go regularly to the gymnasium," Bhaiya said in a gentle yet serious tone He looked at her and silently advised her to bear her separation and sorrow bravely

Advancing, we paid our respects to father and mother Pulling Bhaiya towards her, Radha-mata said, "Vasu, never remove your armour from your body Never leave Shatruntapa alone " She never addressed me as Shon but as Shatruntapa, the "Harasser of Enemies '

"Mother, what have I to fear who have the armour of your grace and an impenetrable skin? Grant us your blessings," Bhaiya said humbly Mother smelt our heads Bhaiya ran his fingers lovingly through the long curly hairs of Vrishasena, Prasena, Bhanusena, Chitrasena, Sushena and Vrishaketu Picking my daughter high up, he said, "Minu, tell your father to drive my chariot properly We'll bring back a handsome husband for you "

"Uncle, what's a husband?" she asked, touching his flesh-earrings We laughed

Repeatedly holding back, with great effort, our tears, we took leave of our family members

My eyes said to Meghamala, "I must go now " She did not wish others to see her wiping her tears, so she stepped behind the door We turned to face the army There was no looking back now The noose of domestic affection always tries to strangle heroism, one has to break free sooner or later As I gazed at the royal banner fluttering atop the palace, I had the impression that it was telling me to do exactly that A gold-studded saddle had been placed on milk-white Vayujit Bhaiya leapt on it with ease Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman, standing at the head of the army, were the only ones escorting us to the bank of the Ganga They also mounted their horses Passing the warflag of the Kauravas in my hand, Bhaiya cast of glance at the long lines of fully-armed elephant-warriors, horsemen and foot-soldiers Assured that all was well, he raised the royal sceptre and shouted out the way to the soldiers "On to the kingdom of Panchala!"

He appeared to me to be the Sun-God himself on the eastern horizon He clamped his thighs tight around Vayujit and dug his heels in—and instantly the horse flapped its tail and trotted ahead Simultaneously a cacophony of conchshells, large drums, trumpets and tomtoms burst forth

Shouts of victory from the advancing ranks of the army of four *akshauhinis* shook the ramparts of the palace

"Karna, Raja of Anga!"

"Victory to him!"

The royal sceptre of the Kauravas glinted in the sunlight Vayujit emerged from the wide-open main gate By coincidence a white cow happened to come in front of Bhaiya exactly then He reined in Jumping off, he paid homage by touching her hooves With a jerk he tore off the queen-of-the-night garland from his

wrist and placed it respectfully at her black hooves For an instant he touched her white forehead with the royal sceptre of the Kauravas Seeing this, the ready-for-battle soldiers again burst into acclamation

"General of the army, Maharaja Karna!"

"Victory to you!"

My chest swelled with pride I had never experienced such a stirring sight before We were charioteer's sons, yet we were today proudly commanding an army of brave Kshatriyas And they were applauding us to the skies with vociferous approval! They were actually running behind us! In no time at all we arrived at the bank of the Ganga The ferrymen who had been sent in advance lowered hundreds of strong boats from the backs of elephants Swiftly guiding them to the water, they held the oars The eager foot-soldiers in no time at all were taken over to the other bank The horses and elephants swam across Soon the entire army had been ferried across Only the four of us remained behind Dismounting from Vayujit, Bhaiya embraced Duryodhana tightly While embracing Ashvatthaman, he said, "Son of my guru, what you had said is true Man's life is indeed like a drop of dew Every person does the best he can to cast the rays of his glory on the world With your blessings, I will return as World-Conquering Karna after my mission of world conquest "

"Karna, I am convinced you will succeed Go, my blessings are always with you " Drona's son raised his hand The ends of his head band fluttered in the breeze His eyes had become moist

"I take your leave then "

Leaving Vayujit to swim across, we climbed into the boat and raised our hands They stood silent on the wet sand and waved We left Hastinapura far behind The waves of the Ganga buffeted our boat, as if bidding us farewell, "Karna! Shon!" In the far distance, the royal flag on the palace fluttered grandly

3

The crossing of the Ganga was over, and the excitement of the world conquest began The first city in the east happened to be Bhadravat, twenty *yojanas* away, ruled by Raja Shvetaparna His spies had given him advance warning of our mission To avert bloodshed, he ordered welcome arches to be decorated with

mango leaves, and received us personally with his minister, offering diamonds, rubies and other gems in a gold platter The world-conquest had started auspiciously with a surrender We stored his wealth-offerings in carriages and continued advancing eastwards After leaving Shevetaparna's kingdom we had to re-cross the Ganga in order to set foot in the kingdom of Panchala The most arduous part of the campaign lay in crossing the rivers, for which reason we had arranged for a specially strong naval contingent, which consisted mostly of excellent swimmers and tall, sturdy fishermen This contingent was not expected to take part in actual warfare, indeed, at times of battle, its members passed their time resting in camp tents Their mission was to reconnoitre various territories and cleverly find out which rivers were fordable where, and keep the flotilla of boats in constant repair

A separate contingent consisted entirely of cooks They and the cremators of the dead did not participate in actual battle They were used by the regular soldiers as an essential convenience, like a shield Our world-conquering army was a metropolis on the move, a cross-section of all human types And all had total faith in the ability of their general The entire army was a paragon of discipline and dedication

We marched on Panchala with the speed of wind Drupada was the Raja there—father of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas His son, Prince Dhrishtadyumna, would never accept our supremacy—he had to be humbled on the field The march took seven days Our tents dotted the countryside Every *yojana* we glimpsed the heart-touching beauty of nature Our soldiers revelled in the swaying floral procession of *kumbha* blossoms, *kamarakas, kumkuma, satona, halavana,* flame-of-the-forest, *patala* and other trees No matter how much territory we covered, no one seemed to tire Neither hot nor cold, the invigorating, even-temperatured weather stimulated our dreams of victory The tenth day after we left Hastinapura saw us again on the bank of the Ganga Bhaiya handed the royal sceptre to me, dismounted, knelt, and offered obeisance to the massive presence of the Ganga

"Shon, Ganga is not a river She is a mother I realise this every day Why, I don't know Remember, in Champanagari, in my boyhood, I used to stare fixedly at her waves, while you were busy collecting seashells " Bhaiya brought the memory back

"Yes I remember once ın Champanagarı you stood ın the Ganga all nıght And Radha-mata asked you about ıt agaın and agaın when you returned home early ın the mornıng Tell me, Bhaıya, what ıs ıt that makes you so attracted to the Ganga?"

"Royal swans are attracted to the Manasarovara, *garuda*-bırds are fascınated by mountaın-peaks, lıghtnıng bolts are drawn to the sky—why? Who knows? None Shon, I wıll never be able to explaın why I am pulled so ıntensely to the Ganga Look " He opened the sılver amulet tıed to hıs arm and placed ıt before me "Radha-mata gave me thıs amulet at the tıme of leavıng Champanagarı Why? Why dıd she gıve me only thıs tıny amulet? Can *you* tell me?" He washed the amulet ın the waters of the Ganga as he asked me, as he turned for an answer, the amulet fell ınto the water, ıt was large-bottomed, so ıt kept bobbıng

"Be careful! If you don't, the gıft of Radha-mata that you have cherıshed for so long wıll fall ın someone else's hands," I saıd, poıntıng at the floatıng amulet He leapt ın and retrıeved the charm, and I re-tıed ıt on hıs arm

"Shon, I have so many vıvıd recollectıons assocıated wıth thıs rıver's banks—on the other bank of thıs rıver my fırst son Sudamana rests ın eternal sleep "

My mınd also became dejected at the mentıon of Sudamana Hıs words were apt I also paıd my deepest respects to the granter of eternal refuge to Sudamana I felt at one wıth Bhaıya

We had now entered the powerful kıngdom of Panchala

4

Kampılya, the captıal of Panchala, was vısıble clearly ın front of us A bloody battle was ın the offing It was ın thıs cıty that the fish-target of the *svayamvara* once whırled, ın thıs cıty Sudamana was slaughtered, ın thıs cıty happened what should never have happened—ın thıs very capıtal of the Panchalas

The emıssary we despatched to Raja Drupada receıved a strange rebuff from Dhrıshtadyumna whıch left us all ın a state of hıgh anger He saıd to our emıssary, "Tell your general that Dhrıshtadyumna, son of the fire-god Agnı, ıs always ready to consume ın flame hıs so called ınvıncıble armour " The blood of all the soldıers and army cohorts boıled when they heard thıs

"Kampilya!" Pointing in the direction of the capital, Bhaiya ordered his army to attack immediately The army of the Panchalas and our own forces clashed on a vast battlefield on the outskirts of the city Dhrishtadyumna stood ranged with his allies—Yudhamanyu, Suratha, and Shatrunjaya—in front of the Panchala forces

Inflamed Bhaiya rained a volley of arrows at him, and roared, "Dhrishtadyumna! This invincible armour is not meant to be consumed, but to consume others " A fierce clash took place between the two Dhrishtadyumna tired of shooting arrow after arrow, and rushed angrily on Bhaiya with drawn sword But he was at a disadvantage The setting of the sun put an end to that day's hostilities The soldiers retired to their tents

The second day we faced Yudhamanyu, he was routed in no time by Bhaiya, who was thirsting for victory Next it was Dhrishtadyumna in close combat As the sun rose in the sky, Dhrishtadyumna started to waver and succumb The foot soldiers, elephant warriors, and horsemen of both camps were locked in bitter battle Suratha was facing me Bhaiya unweaponed Dhrishtadyumna, who stood with head bowed, in abject humility—before a charioteer's son! The leaderless soldiers of Kampilya fled in all directions The kingdom of Panchala had fallen Arishtasena brought the old Raja Drupada before Bhaiya His hands were tied Our army burst into shouts of victory that tore through the skies

"Untie him! Untie the hands of the raja!" Arishtasena was ordered in a sharp, ringing voice

Raja Drupada looked up, surprised "What have you in mind, Raja of Anga?"

"Ransom," our general replied, fixing his gaze on Raja Drupada's gold crown

"What ransom? Cattle, gold, gems, diamonds, or male and female slaves?" Drupada bowed his head

"King, such wealth is already there, rotting in Kaurava coffers The ransom I want is something else," Bhaiya said, raising his eyebrows

"What do you want? ' The wrinkles on that old man's forehead deepened further in astonishment Fear made his eyes flicker

"My son's mausoleum You must personally order the construction of my son Sudamana's mausoleum in the city of Kampilya

itself, beside the bank of the Ganga Tell me is this agreeable? Today Within one night " His determined, firm voice shook the flaps of the tents

The calm face of the old Raja appeared tired and worn-out with reminiscence He nodded agreement The father-in-law of the Pandavas acknowledged the suzerainty of the Kauravas The mausoleum for Sudamana was built overnight on the bank of the Ganga We made preparations to leave Kampilya Next day the minister of Panchala arrived and stood before me with salvers of ransom offerings Seeing the salvers, I was surprised Bhaiya had stipulated no other demands Yet Raja Drupada had sent the offerings Finally he had understood the real calibre of Karna

5

We left Kampilya after placing the rare *madhumalati* flowers of Panchala at the white mausoleum constructed nearly fifteen years after Sudamana's death Our messenger took with him news of the capitulation of Panchala to Hastinapura, with instructions from me to narrate the full details of Sudamana's mausoleum to Vrishali-*bhabhi* The news would certainly bring some relief to a suffering mother

Leaving Panchala behind, our army forged ahead eastwards in the direction of Kosala The confidence of our soldiers had doubled as a result of the intoxication of victory They sped like showers of arrows from a bow Fifteen days had passed since we left Hastinapura Flushed with success, the warriors ran like a river overflowing We approached the frontiers of Kalakuta The really difficult hurdle now facing us was the forest of Naimisha How would such a dense, impenetrable forest ever be crossed by a such a large force? Yet, without crossing it we could not hope to enter the kingdom of Kosala Or should we change course and make the kingdom of Kashi our next target? The kingdom of Kashi was many days of horse riding along the banks of the Ganga If we followed this course, the three territories of Kalakuta, Kosala and Kirata would fall out of the orbit of our world conquest That is why we had chosen Kosala as our next target, accepting the challenge posed by the Naimisha forest

The dark fortnight of the month of Margashirsha had begun Moonlessness made night marches impossible We camped wher

ever we could. On the fourth day of the fortnight we crossed the Gomati river. Now we were right in front of Naimisha. After three days of arduous marching, on the bitter-cold seventh morning, we arrived in Naimisha. Gazing at that forest, left all of us dumbfounded. It looked as if a huge mountain had spread its hands and legs of mist-shrouded trees after trees after trees. The terrain was flat, but the forest utterly inaccessible. Our tents looked so insignificant by comparison.

Dawn rose. Like flocks of birds swirling up into the sky when a catapult shoots a pellet, the rays of the sun scattered the mists of cloud. With the mist dispelled, the verdant forest looked even more fearsome. Suddenly we could hear the calls of eagles, cuckoos, *dhanchharis, chitrarathas,* chandolas, *bharadvajas, patrarathas,* kokilas and other birds. Night cicadas, contrary to their nature, chirped shrilly even in the city. Carnivores roared intermittently, frighteningly.

Confronting us was the awesome challenge of Nature.

What should we do? How cross this thick forest? The army chiefs had all gathered in my tent to devise a way. Well versed in the arts of war, yet none of them hit upon any idea. Arishtasena, Sanghamitra, Hiranyavarman,Vyaghrasharma, Viradatta—none knew how. It was not possible to return with such a huge army. We sat there, worried, with creased brows. By this time Bhaiya, after his morning rituals and oblations, turned up, smiling. We stood there, heads bowed.

"What's the matter, Shon? Why are all of you so silent?" he asked, raising his golden eyebrows.

"How do we cross this forest? We'll have to get the army across by another route." I said this, pointing to the forest of Naimisha, and explaining our predicament.

"Forest!" He slapped his cupped fist on his left palm and stood there in brief deep thought, gazing at his feet. His long, sturdy toes moved up and down. Then, raising his head, he said firmly to Hiranyavarman, "Hiranyavarman, mount a fast powerful horse, ride deep into the forest and see if there is any rishi's ashram or any river anywhere. Go immediately."

"I shall do as ordered." Holding his sword, Hiranyavarman left the tent. We heard the clip-clop of horse's hooves receding in the direction of forest.

Astonished, we stared at our general. Was he hoping to reduce the forest to ashes with the help of the *tapasya* of a rishi?

"Shon, who is in charge of supplying wine to the troops?" he asked an irrelevant question.

"Somaparna," I replied, curbing my surprise.

"Summon him."

I had a soldier sent, and in no time at all Somaparna was standing before us.

As soon as he arrived, Bhaiya approached him and asked, "Somaparna, what do you add to the soma juice to make it extra strong?"

"The intoxicating flowers of the mahua tree."

"Go, tell your workers to go instantly to the forest and bring all the mahua flowers and soma plants they can."

"As you command, Sire." Somaparna left.

From our tent we noticed his workers wending their way to the forest.

I could make no sense of Bhaiya's disconnected commands. Had we left home to conquer the world or to drink wine? It was too much—I could not be silent. I asked, "What is it you are up to?"

"Shon, we have 87,000 elephants in our army. Somaparna will see to it that 40,000 are plied with copious draughts of wine. After they get intoxicated, soldiers will keep prodding them in the back with spears. Infuriated with pain, the beasts will plunge trumpeting inside the forest. These tall trees will totter and fall under their tremendous onslaught. Our massive musth elephants, eager to charge ahead, will batter aside the toppled trees with their trunks. To inspire them on, we'll have half of them she-elephants." He said this casually and calmly, with arms folded across his chest, surveying all the chiefs. His round face was radiant with the self-confidence of a leader. His blue eyes sparkled.

"Why did you send Hiranyavarman ahead? What's the connection between the rishi's ashram and the river?"

"In order to make sure that no rishi's ashram gets trampled under the charge of the elephants, which will only excite his fatal curse on our heads."

We were dumbfounded.

"And the river?" I was impressed by his plan. I asked this, gazing at his handsome forehead. I was proud of his fine leadership.

"These infuriated elephants will bathe to their heart's content in the river Their intoxication will die down Our march will proceed with no change of route " His blue eyes had an eerie glow We had seen many examples of his endless strength and ability, but this was the first time we realised how much resourcefulness was required of a general I had never seen such bold decision-making in any other person

The innumerable difficulties that soldiers face are often removed by a single shrewd decision of an intelligent general

In a short time Hiranyavarman returned from the forest His dress was in tatters His chest was heaving

"Maharaja, there is no ashram in the forest—but there is a large river a long distance away It must be the Sarayu " He said this, panting, and paid his respects He was not even conscious of his ragged clothes

A smile stretched across the round face of our general His eyes glowed

"Exactly what we want No ashram, but a river certainly " He removed a blue-bead ring from his finger and flung it happily towards Hiranyavarman

We emerged from our tent, determined to sweep a way through the forest

6

A mixed herd of forty thousand elephants and she-elephants! The howdahs and boats on their backs were removed, the mahouts took off the silk trappings, and Somaparna busied himself with soaking the mahua flowers in the soma juice to prepare the intoxicating brew The formation of the army was completely restructured The unencumbered elephants were stationed in front

"What if we place the horsemen behind the elephants?" I asked the Raja of Anga and pointed at the herd of forty thousand elephants swaying their trunks

"No Only the burden-carriers will be behind the elephants And behind them the horsemen "

"Why? Why this?" I did not think his plan a safe one

"No matter how destructive the elephants in front are, the thorny creepers of the forest will still pose a problem for them Some burden-carriers are sure to get injured by these creepers

The horsemen behind them will at least be able to lift them up on their horses In this way not a single soldier will be left behind," he explained with his usual poise I was overwhelmed by the extraordinary concern he showed for every soldier

Following his instructions, we employed this unusual formation to cross the forest—in front the unencumbered elephants, behind them the spear contingent, next the burden-bearers, the infantry, the cavalry, and last of all the rest of the elephants

After the completion of the troop formations, the elephants were fed huge quantities of the intoxicating brew They swung their trunks up and down excitedly Their shrill trumpeting drowned even the cacophony of the forest birds and the noises of our army The liquor soon took effect, the spear-wielders began lunging at their hides from the back Teetering, the agitated beasts charged into the forest like cascading hill streams

They crackled and crashed on the ground—kanchana trees, *kimshukas, karnikaras, helas, haradas, ashokas, punnagas*, palms, *tamalas, khadiras, audumbaras, gambharis, satonas, undanis, patalas*, mahuas, flames of-the-forest, *sirisas*, pipals, *kinjalas* and more Screeching with fear at the advancing trumpeting of the herds of elephants, birds abandoned their nests and flew far away The forest-obscured earth, always thirsting for sun-rays, was blessed—for the first time she had a darshan of the sun The same forest that a brief while ago had posed a dilemma for us now opened a road for us—seeing this I could not contain myself—I raised my hand and shouted "General Karna "

"Victory to him!" The shouts rose from all sides The lakhs of soldiers who came behind the elephants seconded the acclamation The noise was so tremendous that the elephants' trumpeting paled before it We had succeeded in levelling the famed forest of Naimisha

Crossing the Naimisha forest, we arrived at the Sarayu river The forest-conquering triumphant elephants, screaming blindly, plunged in a body in the waters Their splashing turned the Sarayu's waters muddy We were going to give them two days' water sports before marching again Seeing them in the Sarayu's waters made me remember Hastinapura

We were now in the territory of Kalakuta, a kingdom with nothing worth conquering Nor was there any ransom to be expected from this thinly populated region Nevertheless, as soon

as they got news of our entry, they turned up with gifts of forest fruits and sweet wine for the army

Ahead lay Ayodhya, the capital of the Kosalas The Kosalas were certainly going to put up resistance The month of Margashirsha was on its way out We had been away from Hastinapura for a month Our messenger sped towards the capital of the Kauravas with the news that we had flattened a path through Naimisha

7

On the bank of the Sarayu we re-formed our original ranks After resting, the refreshed soldiers were doubly eager to continue the campaign The war drums, conches, trumpets and bugles sent sonic ripples over the Sarayu Our general was publicly honoured Our spies had informed us that Ayodhya was situated on the bank of the Sarayu, so we organised a pincer movement around it War-banners furled and the royal sceptre shone in the sun

After a two-day march, Ayodhya came within eye-shot It was ruled by Raja Shighra, a descendant of Rama, son of Dasharatha His son Maru was also a celebrated warrior Noticing the grayish water of the Sarayu, muddied by our splashing elephants, as it flowed downstream towards the city, he had become alert He had ordered the moat surrounding the city filled to the brim But this small manoeuvre was not going to daunt our army which had crossed huge rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna and Gomati

Roaring with unanimous energy, our forces broke across the moat Raja Shighra and his son Maru were standing ready for battle Brandishing his bow he shouted "Glory to—"

"Sri Rama!" added his forces Our swords clashed with theirs The arrows of the Kaurava dynasty clashed with the arrows of the Raghava dynasty 'Facing Bhaiya was Raja Shighra, and in front of me was his son Maru A bloody battle ensued Arrows shrouded the water in the moat Our elephants still had a trace of intoxication left Trampling the infantry of the Kosalas, they dashed against the closed gates of the palace, and battered their way through Someone succeeded in lowering the famed flag atop the Kosala palace for which warriors of the calibre of Ikshavaku, Dilipa, Raghu, Aja, Dasharatha, Rama, Kusha, Atithi, Nishadha, Nala, Nabha, Pundarika, Shemadhanvan, Devanika, Panyatra,

Sahastrashva, Bala, Sthala, Vajranabha, Khagana, Vidhriti, Hiranyanabha, Pushya, Dhruvasandhi, Sudarshana and Agnivarna had sacrificed their blood. Wounded by the unerring and devastating arrows of Bhaiya, Raja Shighra had collapsed in his chariot, and Maru had been taken captive by our soldiers. The kingdom of Kosala fell in a few hours. The moat ran blood. Ayodhya—the expansive city of Ramachandra—was now ours.

Dismounting from Vayujit, Bhaiya hesitated briefly at the gates of that massive palace. His face did not wear the expression of a victorious general.

"Why have you stopped?" I asked curiously.

"Shon, the Pandavas are in exile as a result of gambling. Centuries ago, a raja who was a man of his word left these splendid gates and went into exile—his devotion to his father was such as to melt the hearts of all. It was purely to keep his father's word that Dasharatha's son Raja Ramachandra, with his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita, went smiling out of these gates, accepting a fourteen year forest exile. This is the same Ayodhya—these are the same grand gates." That remarkable episode concerning a divine personality temporarily made us forget the horrific carnage.

As soon as he entered the palace, Bhaiya knelt and paid homage before the throne adorned by Rama of the Raghu dynasty. This act of his further confused me. A victor bending his knees before the throne of the vanquished—this was indeed something extraordinary. But I always accepted as right whatever Bhaiya did. He did not stop short at honouring the throne, he ran up the steps and reached the flag pole at the top of the palace, and with his hands hoisted the Kosala flag which someone had lowered. Holding the flag rope, he shouted, "Raja Ramachandra—"

"—Victory to him!" The shouts of victory came from our soldiers as well as the wonderstruck Kosalas. The Sarayu seemed to swell with joy. Raja Shighra's eyes filled with tears. Why the tears? Because of defeat? Tears of sorrow? Because he remembered the glory of his ancestors? Or were they tears flowing from his Kshatriya soul in gratitude for the darshan he had received of an unparalleled hero? No one could tell.

As soon as Bhaiya descended, Raja Shighra approached and embraced him tightly. I released Maru from his bonds, and he also embraced me. We stayed as guests in the holy city of Raja Rama. There was no thrill of conquest in our hearts. No thoughts of

victory or defeat touched us The truth, after all, is that no one in this world really wins, and no one really loses

We left Ayodhya on the third day, after placing fragrant flowers as symbols of our homage at the throne on which Bharata had placed Sri Rama's sandals and ruled on his behalf The month of Pausha had begun The fields were all covered with stalks of grain, swaying in the breeze Our army was on the move again—this time towards the kingdom of Kirata

8

Crossing the Iravati river, we left behind us the famed cities of the Kosalas—Kushinagara, Shravasti, and Kapilavastu Our soldiers were moving in the direction of the Himalayas We had planned to attack the city named Kashta-mandapa in the kingdom of the Kiratas To do so we had to cross the Gandaka river One splendid victory after another had made our soldiers as happy as a flock of *chandola* birds Their swords seemed to have become sharper

We reached the bank of the Gandaki, the gateway to Kirata, which was ruled by seven puissant kings They were used to extremes of cold climate Our naval contingent had by now become experts in the art of swift fording of rivers Our soldiers were routinely fed on whatever the local staple diet happened to be In the kingdom of the Kiratas they had to be supplied liquor in abundance, in order to survive the freezing cold All this was the delighted responsibility of Somaparna

We had no difficulty in routing the Kiratas, who had not yet heard of our world-conquering mission One swift thrust took us straight to Kashta-mandapa

Seeing rank upon rank of soldiers confronting him, the king of Kirata surrendered unconditionally

Five *yojanas* north of Kashta-mandapa were the Himalayas, whose ice-cold winds we experienced, but from nowhere could we get a glimpse of the mountains themselves Much as we wanted to, it was not possible to see them anyway because we planned to conquer Videha before its people were alerted

9

Immediately after leaving Kashta-mandapa, our army decided to face the Videhas Its capital was Videha, the celestial city of the

Maharaja Mithi, and the capital Mithila was named after him Before that the city was called Vaijayanta Each king of the Nimi dynasty was known as Janaka One of these, Raja Siradhvaja, was the father of Rama's wife Sita Nearly a hundred kings had ruled Mithila in an unbroken line beginning with Nima and continuing till Dhriti The present king was named Bahulashva, whose son Kriti was a great chariot-hero We had to face both in battle—Bahulashva and Kriti

From Kashta-mandapa to Mithila—there was not a single river in all that vast stretch of territory The entire area was plateau The green plains spread as far as the horizon It was systematically devastated by our elephant forces After a few night halts, we reached Mithila, the city of Sita No moat surrounded this capital because there was no river nearby to supply water All around the city were strong fortifications of black stone From the battlements Bahulashva's soldiers began catapulting rocks and fire-missiles Father and son, Bahulashva and Kriti, stood splendidly attired in chariots, guarding the main gate with the help of selected soldiers The main gate was barred from inside with massive bolts Father and son swooped simultaneously on Bhaiya We ringed the fort, making the rock-hurling soldiers our main target of arrows They dropped from the battlements one by one like ripe *audumbara* fruits falling off stems The war-drums and tomtoms of our army began to beat Bhaiya was singly harassing the father-and-son team at the main gate The deluge of rocks from the battlements created heavy casualties in our ranks—and large number of deaths The Mithila campaign had been the most expensive so far

By this time, Bhaiya had rendered Kriti weaponless, hooked his neck with his bow and jerked him towards himself Kriti fell from his chariot with a thud Bahulashva was agitated by the mistaken idea that his son had perished Flinging away his bow, he stood there numb, gazing at the unconscious form of his son Hiranyavarman removed him and his chariot from the scene Our elephants had smashed the ramparts of the forts that had provided protection to a continuous line of a hundred generations of the Janaka rajas of the Nimi dynasty Our huge Kaurava army shouted as it ran in the direction of the main gates

"Victory—"

"—To our General Karna Maharaja!"

Our messenger hurried to Hastinapura with news of the take-over of Mithila of the Videhas by our troops This happened towards the end of the bright fortnight of Pausha

After visiting the field where Sita, Siradhvaja Janaka's daughter, was born, and taking as reparations gems, diamonds, rubies, gold and other wealth, we left Mithila In the kingdom of Videha, the other renowned city was Kusumpura, situated on the bank of Hiranyavati This city also witnessed our victory procession on the full-moon night of Pausha My brother and I were sitting on a mound near the river ghat in the silvery light of the moon In front of our eyes, the dancing waves were playing hide-and-seek with the moonlight On the river bank were kadamba and *bacha* trees Bhaiya's flesh-ear-rings undulated in the gentle breeze, they sparkled in the lovely light

"One and a half months have passed since we left Hastinapura Haven't you even once remembered the capital in all that time?" I asked him with my gaze fixed on the rippling Hiranyavati

"How did you come to that conclusion? *Arre*, I am human too, you know "

"It's not that You are always involved with administration, organisation, food, and military weapons That's why I asked "

"It's true, I am deeply involved in all these matters, but I also miss the people of Hastinapura However, when I'm on the battle-field nothing else matters "

"I want that you send a letter to Duryodhana through the messenger who's going from this city He'll go wild with joy "

"No No point sending him the news now—I prefer to stun him with the news personally, one fine day He has honoured me by making me King of Anga—and I will return the honour tenfold by placing the wealth of this world-conquest at his feet " Saying this, he stood up

"For our world-conquering mission, Vrishali-*bhabhi* must be lighting lamps of thanksgiving in front of the deity in the temple's inner sanctuary, and eagerly awaiting our messenger " I also rose We made our way to the tent

"Is that all that's on your mind? Well, listen to me then Every day my messenger carries a letter from me to Hastinapura "

"Ah Only a little while ago you "

"Those letters are not for anyone in the palace," he said softly, as he walked slowly, gazing at the silvery city of Kusumpura

"Who are they for? For Ashvatthaman?" I recalled their deep friendship I couldn't imagine him writing anyone else

"No Those letters are for the parents of all our soldiers who perished on the field That messenger does not meet anyone in the palace," he said, adjusting his shawl Though I was always near him, it was true that even I didn't really know his mind

10

Leaving Kusumpura, we crossed the border of Videha; in front of us lay the kingdom of Kaushiki-Kachchha, whose capital was Vikramashila on the bank of the Ganga

Passing through the ashram of the rishi Jahnu, we crossed the Kaushiki river and entered Vikramashila The question of battle never arose because the monarch surrendered of his own accord.

Our conquering army kept advancing Would we ever reach the end of Aryavarta? We had penetrated so far east that we started having doubts We even passed through the city of Pundra-vardhana, at the border of Kaushiki

Temperate trees—deodars, shisham, *suruparna, ashoka,* sal, and others—lined the highway Long-tailed, white birds were everywhere In front of us now was the kingdom of Kamarupa We crossed the Kartoya river and camped, because the Lohita (or Brahmaputra) river that lay ahead was the largest that we would have to cross She was not known as a mere river, her femininity had been masculinised and she was called the "son of Brahma "

Even elephants balked at the prospect of crossing this river—let alone the horses We left them at the bank of the Kartoya and, with a band of hand-picked soldiers, we crossed the Brahmaputra with great difficulty in boats, and entered the Kamarpura kingdom There was a single large city in it—Pragjyotishapura, ruled by Raja Bhagadatta

The problems we faced in crossing the Brahmaputra enthused us to achieve success even if we had to do fatal battle with Indra himself For which reason no one feared Bhagadatta, within two days of crossing the Brahmaputra we had surrounded Pragjyotishapura Bhagadatta fought excellently, but could not keep it up We left after extracting his homage This was the extreme limit of our eastern campaign, right on the banks of the Brahmaputra

Leaving behind Tripura, Kamalaka, Suvarnagrama and other cities, we returned after re-crossing the Brahmaputra, and re-joined the elephant and horse divisions. Inevitably, we would turn to the south.

We had to cross the Kartoya again and the Ganga as well. This was our second darshan of the Ganga in the course of our campaign, but the Ganga we would be seeing would have the vastness of the ocean itself, because we would now be conquering the land of Banga where the many mouths of the Ganga enter the eastern ocean.

Eager to enter Banga, we crossed the huge Ganga—the Ganga that leaps and thunders down the shoulders of the Himalayas where she is born and where she is like a self-willed young girl, the Ganga who becomes a mischievous teen-ager near Prayaga where she asks the secrets of the Yamuna and the Sarayu, the Ganga who becomes a radiant bride as she enters and delights the alluvial plains in her slow and steady progress to a shy union with her would-be husband.

On the bank of this Ganga we came across the city of Kalika, dedicated to the goddess Kalika. Samudrasena and Chandrasena, two brothers, ruled Banga from this capital. The population was small and, as a result of isolation from the neighbouring kingdoms, Banga was backward in skills associated with warfare. Still, their warriors put up a stiff resistance. Both Samudrasena and Chandrasena fought bravely, but it was impossible for them to hold back our ocean-like forces. Chandrasena died on the battlefield. With Samundrasena losing consciousness, the Banga army laid down arms and surrendered. Banga was in our hands. Two months had passed since we left our homes. This was the first exciting darshan we had of the eastern ocean. Seeing the doomsday dance of the leaping and thundering waves, we realised the insignificance of our victory campaign. No matter how many mountains of achievement he attains, man remains trivial in front of Nature—like drops of water bobbing and slapping in the waves of the eastern ocean.

Because Bhaiya expressed a strong desire to stay a day in Kalika, we camped near the orchestrated, mysterious music of the ocean.

Next dawn I couldn't find Bhaiya in his tent. Thinking that he must be among the soldiers, I made enquiries everywhere, but there was no trace of him. I had a troubling premonition. We had

made enemies of too many rajas—what if one of them had turned traitor? Every moment made me feel more and more uneasy. How would the army advance without a general? He was general to all the others, but to me he was also a beloved brother. I sent out secret search parties in all directions. The soldiers knew nothing of this. They were all busy preparing for further marches.

Of the search parties, Kirtidhvaja returned some time later. Seeing his smiling countenance I cocked my ears to listen to his happy news.

"Maharaja is safe and well. He is offering *arghya* standing waist-deep in the waters of the ocean. I returned immediately without breaking his deep meditation."

I breathed freely.

11

Tamralipta was the kingdom after Kalika. Its capital also was named Tamralipta, its raja Tamralipta too. Tamralipta and Malla were so tiny that their total land area did not equal even that of Hastinapura, so there was no question of any resistance. Only one other kingdom had the strength to oppose us—Magadha.

Having received news of the fall of Banga, trembling Tamralipta was waiting to welcome us at the city gates, with the desire of making peace. The Raja's gifts to us consisted mostly of pearls. His kingdom was at the edge of the ocean, famous for its offshore pearls; most of its citizens were pearl-traders, supplying the pearl needs of all Aryavarta.

The question now was: should we leave Tamralipta and turn in the direction of Odra? We were wondering whether to invade the small kingdom of Malla, because between Odra and Tamralipta lay the inaccessible mountain range called Riksha. There was no alternative before our army except to march towards Malla; we were eager now to do so because, beyond Malla lay Anga—the kingdom which had been bestowed on Bhaiya by Raja Duryodhana. Bhaiya had changed the capital of the kingdom to Champanagari. We were now going to get a darshan of that long-distant Champanagari where we had sported in our childhood, quarrelled and bickered, and grown up in.

Passing by the Malla hills we came to the territory of Malla. Since Bhaiya stayed in Hastinapura, he had entrusted the admini-

stration of Anga to a governor, who came to welcome us Bhaiya was respectfully received Our soldiers were straining to reach the border of Anga They knew that the Raja of Anga would not leave his kingdom for at least another four days All would get ample time for resting

The governor escorted us to the border of Anga Karna, the Raja of Anga, the world-conquering Anga-raja Karna set foot in Anga Thousands of citizens thronged at the border, welcoming him with flowers in their hands Wives turned up with water-filled pots Overjoyed by the darshan of their Raja, thousands rent the sky with shouts "Victory to Maharaja Karna, the Raja of Anga!" "Victory to Vasusena Maharaja, Lord of Champanagari!"

It had all come true—the childhood prediction made on the throne of stone Flowers were showered Since we left Hastinapura, we had not received the auspicious saffron tilak on our shields—till now *Arati* was offered in our honour The army of the Kauravas marched into Anga to the accompaniment of music and victory cries Joy made my head feel light as a feather A very special strength is required to experience ecstatic happiness Bhaiya sat in his chariot, serene as always With folded palms, he modestly acknowledged the pure affection of his subjects, absolutely unruffled His round face shone with the dazzle of the sun itself The world-fathering Sun, pouring his light on our chariot, must have watched the spectacle with wide-open, wondering eyes I could almost hear his blessings, "Victory to you, Karna!'

We arrived in Champanagari early evening—our first visit to the city after thirty years This was the city of our thatch-roof charioteer's dwellings This was the city which held our most cherished memories of childhood, whose thatch roof sheltered us like a protective umbrella, which brought us up in laughter and games, which had taught us whatever needed to be taught

Karna and Shon gazing at flocks of birds as they drove in their chariot along the bank of the Ganga to collect sea shells, Karna and Shon using trees and creepers as target practice for arrow-shooting, Karna and Shon fetching chariot-timber from the forest, Karna and Shon narrating their experiences to Radha mata, Karna and Shon standing on a single slab of stone and challenging the bull in the mock-game of the royal council, Karna riding in his chariot to Hastinapura and looking back to catch a glimpse of his

brother Shon, and Shon with lifted hands running after the chariot till it crossed the city limits All these incidents had been witnessed by the creepers and vines and birds and beasts of the place And today!

Today the world conquering Raja of Anga, Karna, and his right hand man Shon—both were entering the same city with joyous feelings And the citizens were applauding them with deep affection, showering golden flowers on them Ah! How unpredictable life is! From tiny seeds such gigantic banyans emerge! From trickles no bigger than a little finger originate the massive rivers called the Ganga and the Yamuna I wasn't sure myself if I was seeing it all happening or if I was dreaming

We were driving in our chariot on the road to Champanagari with memories of our childhood in one corner of our minds and memories of our world conquering campaign in another

During these thirty years the whole face of the city had altered Elegant edifices had come up since its declaration as the capital city Bhaiya's eyes seemed to be searching for something His palms were joined to acknowledge the demonstrations of affection but his eyes were seeking someone The sounds of musical instruments seemed to make the city blossom, as it were Bhaiya's name was constantly mentioned in the shouts of victory

Suddenly Bhaiya raised his hand and instructed me to stop the chariot I pulled at the reins He alighted and quickly mixed in the crowd, I trailed behind Hurriedly he strode past the large buildings till he reached the empty playground situated at the back—the playground where we had played "Kings" in our childhood The stone which had served as his throne lay in a corner The part we used as a seat had been overturned while construction was going on for a new building On all sides weeds had sprung up, the stone slab was covered with moss

' Shon, look—over there—Vasu bhaiya's very first throne!" Handing his sceptre to me, he rushed forward and tilted the stone slab upright Then, taking back the sceptre—the same sceptre that had humbled the might of so many kings—he placed it on the slab It was difficult to fathom what was going on in his mind

There weren't even his childhood playmates around to shout, "Victory to the Almighty Lord and Ruler of Champanagari, Vasusena!" Nor was there any bull, infuriated by the shouting, charging at him There were only memories, memories that had become truths, flesh and-blood facts, so to say

After some time, he picked up the sceptre. Once again he glanced at the "throne". Then we returned, and climbed into our chariot, manoeuvring once again through the thronging crowds on the main road. We arrived at the group of thatched huts where we passed our childhood. Following Bhaiya's instructions, the governor had maintained them well. Staying in them were the charioteers of the governor; and they were standing now in front of their thatched huts looking with pride at our victorious army in order to have a darshan of the commander-in-chief. The thatched hut in which we used to live had an elderly charioteer standing in front. I paid homage to the hut in my mind, and lifted my whip in order to swerve the horses in the direction of the bank of the Ganga.

Bhaiya intercepted my uplifted hand.

"Get down, Shon!" he said, jumping down first. Without so much as a glance at anyone, he went straight to his thatched hut. Seeing him right in front, the old charioteer, perturbed, shuffled inside. As he entered following the old man, Bhaiya's head struck the lintel. He had indeed grown taller, but the door hadn't kept pace with his height. He measured himself against the lintel. Stooping, he entered inside; I followed.

For the agitated governor, it was his first visit to the thatched hut. The governor had no words to say when he saw the Raja of Anga himself, the conquering commander-in-chief of the 800,000 strong Kaurava army, the flesh-ear-ringed and invincible-armoured handsome hero squatting on the blanket spread by the old man.

"Maharaja, let us go to the palace," he said dutifully.

"No. It is my desire to stay in this thatched hut for three or four days. I will eat the same food as this charioteer. I wish to go to the Ganga to make my *arghya*-offering. Please do not trouble yourselves to come and see me here. See that the soldiers are well provided for. You may go."

Bhaiya said this, looking at the thatched ceiling.

"It shall be done," the governor said with a bow, as he left.

I lowered my head in shame. The thatched hut I had reservations about, had been fully approved and accepted by Bhaiya.

"Shon, come here, on this blanket." He sat me next to him. By this time, the governor made a second entrance. He ordered the old charioteer, "Ai, you, go out. Leave the Maharaja alone, to rest."

"No, this good man will remain You can go " The governor was ordered in no uncertain terms

I gazed at Bhaiya's toes, I was lost in thought All my life, from childhood onwards, seemed to be dancing around me I knew I had done at least one good thing in my life—I had agreed to become the charioteer of a large-hearted, incomparable hero

12

We had no idea how swiftly our four days passed in Champanagari Before leaving the thatched hut, Bhaiya took off his pearl necklace and placed it in the hands of the old charioteer "See that this thatched hut is always made happy with the presence of people, invite relatives from far off lands for this purpose," was the advice he gave Refusing the gold tribute that was being offered to the governor, he instead gave him large quantities of diamonds and rubies from the world-conquest booty, instructing him to add to the glory of Champanagari

When next will we get a darshan of Champanagari? Who could say when, and how? We departed from the city with tear-filled eyes

The next kingdom was that of the war-happy Magadhans In the whole of Aryavata, the Magadhans were second only to the Kauravas of Hastinapura in military exploits Under Jarasandha's leadership, they had attacked Mathura seventeen times All the neighbouring kingdoms openly acknowledged the supremacy of Magadha Jarasandha had subjugated the kings of Bhoja and incarcerated hundreds of royal personages to be offered as human sacrifice in the Nara Yajna The fully equipped army of the Magadhans resembled a roaring ocean of huge Bhima like waves Maces, spears, *tomaras*, fire-guns, swords, bows, arrows, shields, three pronged lances, elephants, horses, *bhushundis*—the army was filled with expert warriors The army comprised full five *akshauhinis*, which meant that we would be facing ten lakh soldiers on the field The Magadhans were descendants of Kuru, their capital was Girivraja, founded by Raja Vasu on the banks of the Ganga After Raja Vasu, his son Brihadratha ascended the throne Brihadratha's powerful son Jarasandha was responsible for enlarging the territory and authority of Magadha by subduing the neighbouring kingdoms and making vassalas of their rulers

Jarasandha had been killed by Bhima, and Jarasandha's son Sahadeva now sat on the throne of Magadha Our army was poised to clash with his At the time of leaving Champanagari, we had inducted some of Champanagari's finest soldiers into our ranks, which had now swelled to around a million That million included soldiers who had been gifted to us by subjugated rajas It was an evenly matched encounter At the end of the bright fortnight of Pausha, we tramped over endless roads and, skirting the ashram of rishi Durvasas, we arrived at the city limits of Girivraja No sooner had we done so than we got a taste of the Magadhan army's cunning They had covered the trenches all around the city with sticks of firewood and set them on fire The ancient impenetrable head-uplifted ramparts of Girivraja presented an awesome spectacle in the light of the ringing flames There was nothing we could do except sit and wait It took two days for the crackling sticks to reduce to glowing embers Another two days before those embers turned to ash, while we camped and waited And on the third day, we found to our surprise early in the morning that the Magadhans had overnight filled the trenches with fresh firewood Again massive tongues of flame leapt up, licking the ramparts Our soldiers started whispering, "How many more days will this go on? Will we ever be able to defeat the Magadhans?"

Eight days of camping beyond the trenches had made our soldiers restless Something had to be done fast The ninth day dawned Acrid sparks from the shooting flames stung the eyes of our soldiers From the other side of the trenches the Magadhan army amusedly watched our discomfiture We were completely baffled

In desperation, I summoned an emergency meeting of all generals and section chiefs Bhaiya sat in his tent, silent, lost in thought No one dared even approach him The emergency session, therefore, was held without Bhaiya present Our fate was hanging in the balance A decision *had* to be taken should we attack, or must we retreat?

As soon as the generals and chiefs assembled, I came to the point—how were we going to tackle the problem of the flaming trenches? They came up with varied suggestions One thought we should get water from the Ganga with the help of elephants and flood the trenches Another suggested we wrap damp cloth around the feet of our soldiers And a third "Why not simply bypass this

kingdom, get it over with, and forget all about it?" Nonplussed and mystified, that's what they all were

Still another idea was placed before the assembly "Better than twiddling thumbs and doing nothing is to order batches of soldiers to jump in the trenches They will perish, but the rest of the army will walk over to the other side on the strength of their sacrifice."

Some found this proposal attractive True, it would mean the loss of four or five hundred men, but those who made it to the other side would see to it that the sacrifice was not wasted Soldiers who had to cross on the backs of the corpses of their fellow-soldiers would make short shrift of the Magadhans—reduce them to pulp, in fact

I ended the meeting, instructed the members to return to their respective tents, and immediately ordered a list prepared of the names of volunteers ready to sacrifice their lives Not just one or two, hundreds came forward to be listed in the roll-call of this horripilating honour It was left to me to decide who to select from the volunteers I chose the massive-bodied I doubt if anyone in any war ever had to make such a heart-rending decision I ordered them lined up in ranks and, satisfied with my decision, I made my way with bowed head to Bhaiya's tent

He had removed his head-dress, and his curly golden hair flowed freely around his face His eyes were closed Cupping his chin in his palm, he was deep in thought

'Raja of Anga, there is no need of worry any more I have devised a plan of getting across the trenches " I sat near him and explained the strategy

'No, Shon, no! It's out of the question " He said this, standing up suddenly and pacing up and down, distressed

For a moment there was total silence I hadn't the courage to speak up against his refusal What he ordered, was final

'I am not prepared to sacrifice a single Kaurava soldier to combat the shrewd plan of the Magadhans If a Kaurava has to die, he will die fighting on the battlefield," he said firmly

"But—but how shall we cross the trenches?" I asked

Dead silence again Pressing his hands against his temples, he stalked the tent-room, then abruptly stopped—but only for a second He closed his eyes, then, opening them, he smiled and replied, 'There is a way '

"What way?" I asked quickly

"Shon, go and order half the boats of our hundred-boat naval unit dismantled See that the planks are kept aside We'll use them to cover the embers, and our soldiers will then march across without a single loss of life " He put on his head-gear His blue eyes gleamed His flesh ear-rings swayed charmingly

I touched his feet and left the tent I approached the selected suicide squad and told them 'You have not been chosen to lay your bodies on the burning embers That task will be attended to by the naval unit Go—dismantle the boats and pile up the planks " Thud! Thud! Thud! Blow upon blow! The same boats that had ferried us across the rivers, were now being ripped apart The army chiefs' eyes glowed when they saw the long planks piling up Such a simple tactic, yet no one had thought of it

Wearing his head-gear, our general personally handed over the planks one by one to the soldiers who, receiving them, broke into spontaneous cries of "Victory to—'

"General Karna, Raja of Anga!"

Seeing our entire military force crossing the trenches, the Magadhans on the parapets of the ramparts prepared themselves From apertures in the walls they rained a deluge of arrows at us Our whole army, including elephants and cavalry, had by this time reached the battlements The extraordinary war-skills of the Magadhans kept us wondering and on our toes Tying *palasha*-leaf bags filled with red ants to the tails of arrows, they shot them in the direction of our elephant contingent The instant the ants stung their sensitive ears, the vulnerable elephants that had braved a path through the fearsome Naimisha forest collapsed and died A shrewd trick!

"Shon, plug the elephants' ears with cloth!" Bhaiya shouted, lifting his hand The mahouts tore strips off their shawls and stuffed them in their mounts' ears The challenge overcome, our forces pressed ahead

The Magadhans began hurling stones from the battlements Arrows with flaming tails sped towards us Utterly fearless, Bhaiya succeeded in leading an elephant contingent right up to the main gate Arishtasena, Vyaghravarman, Hiranyavarman—they surrounded the fort Victory was now in our grasp, no matter what happened Victory!

We had indeed reached the main gates but, seeing their formidable massiveness, we were disheartened The fronts were studded

with huge sharp steel spikes When an infuriated elephant charged at them, his trunks got impaled on the spikes And no fellow-elephant then dared to push against the trapped and wounded beast It was a terrible task for the soldiers to free the impaled creature Problem upon problem! Fresh challenges! The main gates of Magadha! The impregnable gates!

Bhaiya paused Patting the back of one of the elephants, he was lost in thought Then, in a flash, he had taken off his armour and hung it on one of the spikes One by one, the warriors behind him took off their armours and followed his example In no time at all every spike had been covered Ten elephants were then goaded with pointed spears, they rushed forward in a bunch and hurled themselves against the gates The invincible gates of Magadha cracked and tumbled on the ground Lakhs and lakhs of zealous but frustrated Kaurava soldiers, shouting victory cries, streamed through the opening into Girivraja like a python sliding inside a hole After that, the kingdom of Magadha was like any other kingdom

The battle was gruesome Jarasandha's son Sahadeva hurled against Bhaiya every form of assault—twin chariots, maces, swords, spears, javelins and various other weapons—before tiring Facing me was the Magadha general The massacre of the Magadhans was completed by the evening The field was filled with the spirits of the dead The ground was littered with shattered fragments of arrows, three-pronged spears, and swords

Weaponless Sahadeva, his hands tied behind his back, was brought by Vyaghradatta in front of the Raja of Anga The same man whose father had trussed up many rajas and incarcerated them, was now standing with hands tied along with his minister before the general of the Kauravas His own general was dead The Magadhans had never suffered such a humiliating defeat Their royal flag had toppled

"Tell us, Sahadeva, what tribute can you offer?" our valiant general asked the defeated raja

"Whatever you desire," replied the shrewd minister

"You tell us, king Diamonds, pearls, gold, *pachus*, coral, paddy, cattle—this tribute is essential But do you know how it is to be paid?"

"As you wish, Raja of Anga," Sahadeva replied weakly His head was bowed Surely he was experiencing the misery of royal personages whom he had earlier captured and imprisoned

"We crossed your trenches by demolishing our boats Build the same number of boats, fill them with the tribute, and offer them as reparation to our second-in-command " He said this, pointing to me As soon as Sahadeva nodded agreement, his hands were freed Magadha, land of brave warriors, had captitulated It was now the beginning of the month of Magha Two months had elapsed since we left Hastinapura The reinforcements that we had brought along from Anga were ordered back to Champanagari Secret messengers were sent to Hastinapura with the happy news of the fall of Magadha

That very night the boat-builders of Magadha as well as our own specialists started non-stop construction of the required boats The soldiers who were unable to sleep as as result of all the hammering and planing passed the time enjoying the performances of nautch-girls in the light of the flaming torches

13

We visited the dungeons where Jarasandha once imprisoned the rajas, accepted the boats filled with the required tribute, and then left Girivraja Passing along the bank of the Niranjana river, we subjugated the kingdoms of Kikata, Manda, Eastern Dasharna, Utkala, and others, and, after skirting the Riksha range, we again proceeded towards the eastern ocean The bright fortnight of Magha was over

The Riksha range abounded with numerous trees including kadamba, *maina, pandara, ud, khaira, asana, kataka, nana, shami, jala-neem, punnaga* The mischievous breezes of the eastern ocean brought the melodies of their whispering tree-leaves to us We crossed the Vaitarani river and set foot in the kingdom of Pundra Imbibing the incredible scenic beauties of Aryavarta at every step, we marched ahead How many species of birds, varieties of creepers, trees, rivers, lakes, flowers, fruits, hills! No one can exhaust the list of the whole range of these attractions that fill our land We went on conquering kingdoms of humans but remembered to pay our respectful homage to the kingdom of nature as we did so

As soon as we entered the kingdom of Pundra, the Raja Paundraka Vasudeva confronted us with his handful of soldiers Hiranyavarman succeeded in defeating him, in fact, there was no need for us to take up arms

with huge sharp steel spikes When an infuriated elephant charged at them, his trunks got impaled on the spikes And no fellow-elephant then dared to push against the trapped and wounded beast It was a terrible task for the soldiers to free the impaled creature Problem upon problem! Fresh challenges! The main gates of Magadha! The impregnable gates!

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campaign was over We were flushed with the excitement of victory

The moment he entered the city, Bhaiya went and paid his respects to the aged parents of Supriya-*bhabhi* At Bhanumanta's insistence, we decided to spend a day in Rajapura It was the fifth day of the dark fortnight of Magha In the evening the chief of the messenger squad came to me with a rider from Hastinapura, who had brought a letter from our guru's son Ashvatthaman He had sped with the swiftness of wind from the kingdom of Magadha to catch up with us I took the silk-wrapped missive from his hand and enquired about Hastinapura We had received any number of messages from Hastinapura, but this was the first letter I went to Bhaiya and gave him the letter

"Where is this from?" he asked without opening it

"Hastinapura From Ashvatthaman "

"What has he to say? Read it out to me " He returned the letter to me, still wrappped

I removed the silk cloth and eagerly read the letter written on *bhurja* parchment

"Friend

Your sky-high victorious exploits arrive every week and impress us here in the palace The consensus talk everywhere is that you have reached the pinnacle of fame in this world-conquest campaign What can a young rishi like me write to a world-conquering hero like you? But please do not read this letter as if written to the world-conquering Karna, but rather as one written to a friend I fully believe that you will be happy to receive this letter I know you very well If this letter from a friend contains any inadequacies, I hope you will overlook them

Sweeping victoriously through Panchala, Kosala, Videha, Kaushiki, Kaccha, Kamarupa, Banga, Magadha, and other kingdoms, you rush ahead like a swift horse indeed For the brief period that you are in their kingdom, they abide by your authority But the moment you march out, they make plans to resume their earlier way of life! Keep in mind that everyone respects his own culture as life-precious That is the way it should be, because that is a sign of healthy life Even the meanest crow does not wish to survive by losing its identity That is why the only real conquest is that which wins by love I am sure that your behaviour has already won the hearts of the people Wealth, property, fame, status—

Next came Kalinga, the kingdom of Raja Duryodhana's father-in-law Chitrangada How to launch an attack on this land? Thinking that such an attack would violate Duryodhana's sentiments, I said to our general, "The kingdom of Kalinga is Maharani Bhanumati's and Supriya *bhabhi's* It is not possible to exclude it from our list of conquests?"

"No With the two exceptions of Dvarika and Mathura I will not spare any kingdom This royal sceptre belongs to all the Kauravas Its significance lies beyond personal sentiments, such as mine, yours, Raja Duryodhana's, or indeed anyone else's Who is the reigning monarch there—Bhanumanta or his father?"

"Bhanumanta, Maharani Bhanumati's brother "

"Send a message to him to surrender If he refuses "

'Then?"

"The same fate awaits him that overtook Sahadeva of the Magadhas Write and tell him this "

Our messenger hurried to Rajapura, the capital of Kalinga Rajapura should have been dear to Bhaiya because of Supriya-*bhabhi's* association with it, but he had no intention of seeing it with eyes other than those of a commander in-chief We waited apprehensively for the return of the messenger and the reply he would bring

14

The messenger returned with the news that Raja Bhanumanta of Kalinga had agreed to capitulate He had ordered the captial to be decorated, and informed that he would receive us at the bank of the Mahanadi river It was fortunate that he made this wise decision

Arriving with our invincible army to the accompaniment of martial bugles, we entered the capital Rajapura from which Raja Duryodhana had abducted Maharani Bhanumati The Raja of Anga had spared the life of Jarasandha in a duel in this very city, which sprawled serene and attractive on the bank of the Mahanadi Raja Bhanumanta approached us, smiling, took the hand of our hurricane-onrushing commander-in-chief and led him to the royal chariot—not in his capacity as a Kaurava, not as the friend of Duryodhana, not as the husband of Supriya *bhabhi*, but as the world-conquering hero Karna More than half of our

down all that I want to, all the leaves would be filled in no time
With my best regards,

Yours affectionately,
Ashvatthaman "

He had cancelled the words "Yours truly" at the close and replaced them with "Yours affectionately" His philosophical nature must have balked at the idea of having any kind of attachment burdening his mind The letter gave me an extraordinary pleasure But it left Bhaiya preoccupied and pensive

"What should we reply?" I asked

"No reply is needed "

15

While making a list of the places in Kalinga worth seeing, the minister of Raja Bhanumanta mentioned the Mahendra mountain A mountain "worth seeing"—the idea struck me as odd There are mountains worth seeing, but from a distance—we knew from experience how difficult it is to climb mountains I asked the minister, "This Mahendra mountain of yours—how does it compare with the Himalayas?"

"Excellently The peaks of the Himalayas shine brightly in the rays of the sun—similarly an axe shines on the peak of Mahendra "

"Axe? What kind of axe? '

"A battle-axe Jamadagni's son, the axe-wielding Parashurama has established an ashram on this hill and is staying there Every last day of the dark fortnight and every last day of the bright fortnight, he slowly descends the slope of the Mahendra mountain and in order to fulfil his Varuna vow, he wades chest-deep into the foaming waters of the eastern ocean and offers his *arghya*-homage to the sun The shores of the ocean are filled with crowds eager to have his darshan on those days Standing there with his thick ink-black beard flecked with ocean drops, Bhagavan Parashurama presents a supremely enchanting sight "

"Bhagavan Parashurama!" A quick thought flashed in my mind—should we go and visit the Mahendra mountain? But how could we leave the army and go on our own? I had expected this question to crop up from Bhaiya We left Rajapura and circled the Mahendra mountain The blue peaks of the mountain were obscured from our view *Karnikara, kattakaranja, nandi, dhava,*

these are very strong walls, but they are unable in the end to protect man from the mightiest world-conquering monarch of all, Death Only one wall withstands that attack, and that is the spirit of man

I have started pontificating and philosophising already in this short letter What can I do? It's my nature It's possible you'll get a little bored So I'll end my preaching here

As you march with your army, you must be observing the vivid and varied beauty of this great land That part of you that appreciates nature will surely be enchanted The joy that comes from the sight of the rippling, babbling waters of a river, the joy that comes from hearing the hum of bees that hover on different-hued fully blown lotuses crowding a lake, the joy that comes watching a strutting and preening peacock calling out happily to Naure, the joy that comes from seeing the seven-coloured rainbow bordering the blue dress of the sky—in my opinion, all these joys are more pleasureble even than the joy of winning ten battles From this point of view, your world-conquest is indeed doubly successful But enough of this!

Now let me come to Hastinapura

It is my habit to go to the Vishnu Temple outside the city for the deity s darshan I also get a darshan of the pipal shoot in the stone cranny—the one I pointed out to you, remember? How amazingly it has grown in these past two months You will be full of praise too when you come and see it for yourself It always reminds me of you So much for that

We are all looking forward eagerly to your return 'We' includes Vrishali *bhabhi* and all the other members of your family My affectionate regards go to Shon *Arre* yes, the most important fact of all has not even been mentioned in the letter yet The day after you set out on your campaign of world conquest, the Queen Mother Kunti devi arrived here from Dvarika She is staying in the thatched hut of the chief advisor Vidura I have a feeling that the chief advisor has called her over I get to see her sometimes The important thing is that I happened to go once to the thatched hut just by chance I paid my respects to her by touching her feet, and the glimpse of her feet reminded me of you How similar her narrow, tapering feet are to yours!

Well, about time I ended the letter, because if I were to write

brothers, Rukmaratha, Rukmabahu, Rukmakesha and Rukmamali, had come from Kundinpura with heavy reinforcements and joined hands with him in Bhojakota Which is why he was all the more ready to do battle and was encouraging his army to be prepared for our attack

It was our supposition that no one would have the ability to confront us the way Magadha had But here was Rukmi, ready to prove that presumption wrong, facing us for battle Unlike the Magadhans, who fought step by step, Rukmi's straight confrontation with us on the field made him appear to me even more formidable than they His forces and ours clashed in hand-to hand combat on a vast battlefield near Bhojakota, like two oceanic armies grappling Vidarbha had never witnessed such an encounter

Roaring his war-cries, Bhaiya personally clashed with Rukmi Sparks flew from colliding arrows, as if screeching, "We are Vidarbhan! We are sons of Raja Bhishmaka! We are kinsmen of Rukmini!" The first day was spent in a tumultuous collision of arrows, and victory remained uncertain

The second day dawned Wielding his mace, Rukmi egged his soldiers onward and confusedly clashed with the Kaurava forces Mace in hand, Raja of Anga leapt off his chariot and faced him The shrill screams of conch-shells were deafening To the accompaniment of kettledrums, they impressively and cautiously circled each other Following Radha-mata's instructions, I made every effort to stay near Bhaiya on the battlefield And so it was puzzling for me to see how the warrior who fought so expertly on the field was the same Vasu-bhaiya who used to swing Minakshi up on his shoulder and play with her He whirled the mace in his hand with the same fluency with which I cracked my whip on the horses' backs Occasionally, in order to frustrate Rukmi's lunges, he would leap high up in the air and jump out of the way Seeing them glaring at each other with angry, flaming eyes, I got the impression that two musth-maddened elephants were fighting They continued feinting and lunging without respite, circling according to the rules of mace duel Sometimes an antagonist's mace slipped from his perspiring grasp and fell on the ground, in which case, his opponent merely circled without attacking until the mace was retrieved Their arm muscles were swollen tight, their foreheads streamed with sweat The second day ended indecisively

dhamani, rose-apple and many other kinds of trees were sheltered and nourished by the large-hearted mist-crowned slopes which accentuated the holiness of Bhagavan Parashurama's ashram.

We crossed the southern kingdom of the Kosalas along the banks of the Mahanadi and came to the frontiers of Vidarbha. Vidarbha! The land of Rukmini, Sri Krishna's wife. The entire territory east of Hastinapura had been subjugated, and the campaign of conquest had shifted to the southern region. Magha was over, and Phalguna had come; on both banks of the river neem, pipal, *shalmali* and other trees had commenced a melodious susurrus of fresh-sprouted leaves to herald the arrival of spring. Rukmi, the raja of Vidarbha, would have to welcome Karna, the raja of Anga, before spring set in fully. Rukmi was Sri Krishna's well-wisher. Our general strongly wished that he arrive at a peaceful agreement, and an envoy had been despatched to Kundinpura, the capital of Vidarbha, with this message. But the proposal of peace was rejected. Our army crossed the Vina and Bhadranadi rivers and entered Vidarbhan territory.

In order to take over Kundinpura, which was situated on the Payoshni river, our forces attacked with the speed of wind from the vantage of the roads. But we saw the massive army of Rukmi blocking our march in the town of Bhojakota, and we were taken by surprise. How and why had this raja left his capital and decided to stop us midway? The facts that emerged from our investigation were mind-boggling.

This stubborn raja had opposed his father Bhishmaka, and declared that his sister Rukmini be married to Shishupala and not the cowherd called Krishna. At the time when Sri Krishna abducted Rukmini from Kundinpura, he had left the city and taken a solemn vow that he would free Rukmini and give her to Shishupala—failing which, he would never set foot in Kundinpura again. He had successfully blocked the flight of Sri Krishna's chariot which was carrying Rukmini and attacked it fiercely within the borders of his kingdom. Sri Krishna routed him, and raised his sword in order to behead him. Rukmini pleaded for and saved her brother's life. Many years had elapsed since then, but he had never returned to Kundinpura. He lived alone in Bhojakota. We had no choice except to overcome his obstructive tactics.

It was inconceivable that Rukmin who had fought with Sri Krishna would succumb to us. In fact, four of his valiant younger

"Raja of Anga, Kárna!"

"Victory to him!" Our soldiers' temporarily suspended breaths burst out in shouts of victory The stock-still soldiers broke loose and rushed in the direction of Kundinpura like flocks of deer

We expected defeated Rukmi to depart with lowered head, but he caught hold of the Raja of Anga's right hand, raised it high, and shouted to the soldiers of both armies, "There is no hero in all Aryavarta to equal Karna, the Raja of Anga! I, Raja of Vidarbha, Rukmi, welcome him " He turned and embraced our commander-in-chief

Seeing that incomparable sight, I announced joyfully, "Vidarbha-raja Rukmi "

"Victory to him!" both armies joined in

Some of the thoughts in Ashvatthaman's letter were still moving in my mind "Everyone respects his own culture as life-precious That is the way it should be, because that is a sign of life All can be won only by love Your world-conquest is indeed doubly successful "

16

Taking Rukmi with us, we entered Kundinpura The joy of seeing his son return after a thirtyfive years' absence more than compensated Raja Bhishmaka for the hurt of learning about his army's defeat As he climbed up the stairs of the ancient palace of Vidarbha, the Raja of Anga paused at a particular step, exactly as he had paused in Mithila The same expression, the same pensive look of peace The same emotion-filled blue eyes

"Why have you stopped?" I asked

"Shon, the general belief is that Sri Krishna forcibly ran away with Rukmini, but that is not right What he did was to protect her Suppose she had been married to Shishupala what would have been the result? She would have leapt into the Payoshni river the day she left her parents' home That brave lady's tears must have trickled on to this very step as she was led out by Sri Krishna—the tears that were a mixture of her joy at leaving with Krishna and her sorrow at having to hurt her brother by doing so " For an instant he was lost in deep thought, staring fixedly at that step

With silent respect, we climbed the steps Raja Bhishmaka

The third day saw a sword duel, and the fourth day a javelin, but Rukmi remained unbending Nor would Bhaiya relent During these four days thousands of brave soldiers of both armies lost their lives What way out was there? No conclusive victory seemed likely

The fifth day arrived with a battalion of sunrays flooding the field As soon as both armies faced each other, the Raja of Anga raised his arm and ordered the martial music to stop The instant our instruments stopped, the Vidarbhans also became silent

' Rukmi, I will not leave until I have conquered the kingdom of Vidarbha If you wish to stop the slaughter of both armies, then step down and fight a straight duel with Karna "

Khud! Khud!

As Bhaiya stepped down his chariot, loud clapping accompanied him

"Karna, you cannot conquer Vidarbha Come and fight me any way you wish on the ground I am ready "

Khud! Khud!

Similar clapping from Rukmi's side After all, he was Rukmini's brother

In no time at all, the ground was prepared for a duel by spread ing red earth on the fighting area Both armies stood still, staring at each other's leaders In the middle of the neutral soldiers, the two combatants clashed head to head like two fierce tigers grappling between two hills The capital of the Vidarbhans was a few *yojanas* away, but its foundations trembled from the impact of the two duelling parties They were entwined like two pythons in a kundalini embrace The first round ended The sun rose in the sky Ash was rubbed repeatedly on their bodies to dry the perspiration, giving them a horrific appearance The second round ended And now Rukmi began avoiding touching Bhaiya's body, it seemed from his expression that he felt he was touching fire In the meantime, Bhaiya cleverly worked out a tactic The tactic preliminary to the use of the Thorny-Arm hold Thorny-Arm! The fatal hold! I was thinking of this when our heroic commander-in-chief wrapped Rukmi as if he was a bundle and pinned him under his thighs Bhaiya's arms like nooses tightened round Rukmi's neck Wriggling his heels, Rukmi thrashed about like a mortally-stricken snake Helpless! A crushable thing! Dying by slow degrees!

"Rukmi! Surrender! Bhaiya boomed Lifting his right thumb, Rukmi indicated defeat The noose slackened His life was spared

and Sumitra lay senseless on the field of battle, and our doctors revived them. Actually speaking, we had no enmity with anybody. The conflict was with the proud ego of anyone who considered himself invincible, not with insentient forms. Our commander-in-chief had instructed us so. There was only one punishment for a soldier who employed arms against an unarmed opponent, an unconscious enemy, one who had surrendered, an attendant, and a woman: he would have to wield the same weapon against himself in front of the entire army, without a murmur, until he died. Such an occasion never rose in our army, for which the credit went to the unblameable, spotless character of our commander-in-chief. His example stood out clearly in front of everyone, like a pure-white peak of the Himalayas, like the dazzling, incorruptible Sun to whom he offered *arghya*-homage.

Accepting the wealth-tribute of Pulinda, we proceeded to the capital of Shishupala called Shuktimati. The great gardener of Time, Kala himself, sat crosslegged, kept stringing the white and black flowers of day and night. We had lost count of how many such flowers he had culled and strung in the last four months.

17

Trampling the sweet-smelling grasses in the bed of the Dasharna river, we surrounded Shuktimati, the capital of Raja Shishupala of the Chedis. Shishupala had of course been killed in Indraprastha; his son Dhrishtaketu was now lord of the Chedis, the son of a life-long enemy of Sri Krishna.

He had married his sister Karenumati to Nakula, as a result of which his relationship with the Pandavas had deepened. It was certain that he would oppose us, but the Kaurava army, marching from one victory to another, was certainly not going to allow itself to be defeated by anyone.

In his strategy of defending Shuktimati, Dhrishtaketu joined forces with his three brothers Suketu, Karkarsha, and Sharabha, and attacked us from four different directions.

Once again, sparks flashed from clashing weapons of war near the Vetravati river. The reverberating war-cries of soldiers swelled the waves on the Vetravati, and the entire riverscape was shrouded with arrows. Dhrishtaketu was a mighty warrior. The bewildering swiftness with which he rushed about, inspiring his

served the delicious meat of *latvak* birds to the entire company It was the last day of the bright fortnight of Phalguna So we left Kundinpura in the evening and marched to the land of the Pulindas Rukmi saw us off at the very boundary of his kingdom Affection had made smooth the creases of victory and defeat

Crossing the Tapi river we came to the Vindhya range One road led to the south It was called the Southern Path Deep in the south was the territory of the Maharatthas, comprising Ashmaka, Gopa, and Malla The Southern Path was so narrow that our elephants could not walk on it Besides, in the central region, was the dense Dandakaranya forest, the likes of which we had not yet encountered in our campaign For this reason we bypassed the Maharattha territories and turned north, making the kingdom of Pulinda our destination Strictly speaking, the Maharattha territories were not considered a part of Aryavarta

Leaving the Southern Path, our army skirted the Vindhya range and crossed the Narmada river In front of us loomed the Nishadha mountain, the dwelling place of Ekalavya, son of Raja Hiranyadhenuka of the Nishadhas Having attained fame as the most brilliant of pupils by sacrificing his thumb as a *dakshina*-offering to Guru Drona, Ekalavya roamed that mountain like a fearless lion Though thumbless, he used his two middle fingers to pull the bowstring for hunting savage beasts and subduing enemies Our clever spies kept us informed daily of all activities They had spotted Ekalavya—but, though we eagerly wanted to see him, we never got that opportunity

A ravine separated the two mountains called Nishadha and Shuktimat We had planned to march through that ravine in order to reach Pulinda We sent out scouts to determine if the Pulinda authorities were alert to our presence They were quiet Possibly they had conveniently surmised that our army would never under take to negotiate the long mountain stretch of Vindhya, Nishadha and Shuktimat But when they saw lakhs and lakhs of our soldiers scurrying across the ravine like ants streaming out of an anthill, Sukumara and Sumitra, the two brothers who ruled Pulinda, quickly readied themselves War once more Once more bloodshed Again a torrent of arrows That was all our life had come to mean We had marched out in order to fight anyone who dared oppose us Pulinda fell in the course of a day They did not have time even to properly organise themselves for defence Sukumara

horses all their lives " He said this, glancing in the direction of the river In the meantime, a cowherdess turned up there, to feed water to her white cow, who was accompanied by a calf lunging sharply at the cow's teats But the cow had quickly slipped inside the water, the calf, tail-tuft uplifted, waited expectantly for the mother-cow to return A piece of dried wood drifted on the fast-flowing stream The *anchal* of the cowherdess fluttered in the breeze I was enchanted by the scene so simple, so beautiful So pure! The all-adored cow! The gentle calf! The murmuring river! It struck me speechless

But something happened to our commander in chief—he leapt down from Vayujit, ran forward, waded into the waters, and dragged out the cow by her bell-rope Could it be that he could not bear to see the helpless calf? He did succeed in pulling the cow out of the river, but the calf, frightened by his soldier's uniform, bounded away into the far distance The bobbing stick also disappeared in the distance Holding the neck rope, our world-conquering general stood there, staring unblinkingly at the drifting piece of wood One hand held the royal Kaurava sceptre, and the other the cow's neck-rope

"It doesn't matter It was fated so You tried hard to help the calf, and the calf just fled " I put my hand on his shoulder

"Fate? You go about winning wars with a world conquering army, and all you can do is sing the praise of Fate!" he thundered at me

"What else is it but Fate?" I lowered my head I could not understand what I had said wrong

"Shon, what man calls Fate is his greatest mistake Using Fate as an ally, man tries to run away from the truth Look at that drifting stick All human life is like that The real life is that which faces the buffeting waves " He pointed his finger at the river The neck-rope slipped, and the cow ambled away

18

We crossed the Charmanvati river with the plan of humbling Kuntibhoja and Purujit Next we marched beyond the confluence of Ashvanadi The capital Bhojapura of Raja Bhoja came within eyeshot We had repeatedly heard from the chief advisor Vidura that the childhood of Queen Mother Kunti was passed in this town

soldiers, made him appear before all the warriors repeatedly Our soldiers were under the illusion that there were four Dhrishtaketus He had inherited his father's valiant fervour in every pore of his being Yet he was baffled and disarmed by our commander-in-chief at every step For half the day the Chedis fought determinedly, but their confidence collapsed the instant an arrow of Bhaiya's struck Dhrishtaketu They fled like the waters of the Vetravati rushing downstream during a flood Holding his wounded side with his hand, brave Dhrishtaketu kept vainly urging his fleeing soldiers to stay firm The kingdom of Chedi was in our hands Our conquering Kaurava forces entered Shuktimati and muddied the Vetravati river with their churning conquest

To the north of this city lay Mathura Our messenger sped to Hastinapura with the latest news of victory, with instructions to pause in Mathura on the way and present on our behalf royal silk vestures and gold coins to Raja Ugrasena who had been installed on the throne of Mathura by Sri Krishna It was Bhaiya's express vow that Mathura would not be attacked—hence this special presentation

Leaving Chedi, we marched in the direction of Bhoja, ruled by two rajas, Kuntibhoja the father and Purujit the son, from the capital Bhojapura, situated on the bank of the Ashvanadi The month of Phalguna was ending The sovereignty of springtime was about to descend on the earth Filling our eyes to the full with the prolific loveliness of spring, crossing the Para, Patalavati and other rivers, we came to the bank of the Charmanvati river near Bhojapura Charmanvati! The life-bestowing river that sliced through the Nishadha hills and ran circuitously to its distant destination, the Yamuna, and from the Yamuna, into the Ganga

The spot where Charmanvati greeted our eyes was the enchanting confluence of the Ashvanadi and the Charmanvati Ashvanadi! We had left behind many rivers in the course of our campaign, and I was not even sure of all their names, but how could I ever forget the name Ashvanadi, the Horse-River? It could be simply that I was a charioteer, and the association of "horse" with a river attracted me Standing at the confluence of the rivers, I asked Bhaiya with a view to know what he was thinking, "Ashvanadi how does the name strike you?"

"She runs like a horse, so it is an appropriate name And those fortunate ones who thrive from its waters must also be as swift as

Bhojapura. The palace was ancient, no doubt, but very solidly built. It was evening when we made our entry. The long, golden rays of the setting sun caressed the towers of that old palace. As he placed his foot at the main gate, Bhaiya momentarily paused. He had never departed from his custom—from the main door of the old palace itself he paid his reverent evening homage to the Sun-God.

After dinner, Bhaiya had discussions with father and son, and then someone announced it was time to retire. We were going to sleep in comfortable beds after a very long time. The instant we lay down, a deep slumber would overtake us. But the goddess of sleep was clearly not delighted with me, because all night I could hear the continuous wailing of the baby of some palace maid, who was trying desperately to quieten him. Simultaneously, the windows of the palace banged noisily with the buffeting of the breeze. The flames in the stone lamps in our bedroom flickered in the strong gusts of wind.

But Bhaiya slept on, unaffected.

Before we left the city in the morning, we were shown round the ancient palace by the Raja of Bhoja himself. On one wall was a huge painting of Kuntibhoja, showing an elderly maid pouring water on the Raja's feet. There was only one such painting of Kuntibhoja. It struck me that I had seen the maid somewhere, but nothing came clearly to mind.

"Who is this elderly woman?" Bhaiya asked on seeing the picture. His handsome brow was creased with wrinkles.

"She was a very loyal maid called Dhatri, who lived here during the time of Kunti-devi. When Kunti-devi, the mother of the Pandavas, left this palace, this maid accompanied her as a loyal attendant. We hear stories about her from the elderly attendants in the palace," Purujit replied.

In a corner of the room was a stone peg. Purujit moved it, and an entire man-high section of the wall slid open. A tunnel was visible.

"Where does this tunnel lead?" Bhaiya asked, peering inside. A small bat fluttered out and struck us before sailing gracefully out of the room window. Bhaiya's crown, which was struck by the flight, sat slightly askew on his head.

"This tunnel leads straight to the Ashvanadi river." Purujit informed us. He was obviously very taken by Bhaiya's handsome, towering personality. He personally replied to all our questions.

Because Kunti-devi was Sri Krishna's aunt, the Raja of Vidarbha, Bhishmaka, had despatched a messenger in advance, wisely advising Kuntibhoja and Purujit to negotiate a peace treaty. We were under the impression that we would be obstructed head-on because the kingdom of Bhoja in southern Aryavarta equalled Magadha in prestige A powerful army and the support of Sri Krishna—we were aware that the price for attacking Bhojapura would be heavy—but we had crossed the Charmanvati fully determined to pay the price What transpired, however, was totally unexpected Well, this world, human life, and world-conquering campaigns—these three always bring unpredictable shocks

Purujit and Kuntibhoja placed *parijata* garlands round our necks, we entered Bhojapura, carrying with us the fragrance of *parijata* flowers Bhojapura! The enchanting city established on the bank of the Ashvanadi river which yearned for union with the Charmanvati Till now in our campaign we had not come across any city as attractive as Bhojapura All the edifices showed evidence of great architectural skill The roads were remarkably wide, and shaded on both sides by huge-trunked *ashoka* and mango trees intoxicated by the arrival of spring and spreading colour and fragrance on all sides Inspired, kokilas trilled songs in the entire seven-note spectrum, ruling the sky with flight and drenching it with melody

Our nature-loving commander-in-chief heard the song of a kokila as he was driving along a main road, and said to me, "Shon, listen to these kokilas warbling but don't get carried away by them *Arre*, these birds are brought up by the female crow "

"So what? I think it's they who bring dignity to the female crow's nest," I replied

In order to have a darshan of our incomparably handsome, brave-without-an-equal commander-in-chief, infants and elders, women and men eagerly crowded the balconies Bhaiya, who always folded his palms in loving acceptance of tributes, removed the gold-worked Bow of Victory from his shoulder and, raising it high with one hand, acknowledged the citizens' affection as he drove down the royal path In the distance a bend of the Ashvanadi gleamed in the sunlight The city was festooned with thick garlands of creepers, mango leaves, and lotuses Showers of tiny *vakula* blossoms scattered on Vayujit

We arrived at the palace with the father-and-son ruling team of

troubled our soldiers somewhat After defeating the Malavas, we crossed the Stambatirtha and arrived at the bank of the Subhramati river which represented the boundary of the Malava kingdom Two small kingdoms lay contiguous to it—Anarta and Surashtra

On the shore of the western ocean, in the kingdom of Anarta, lay Sri Krishna's city Dvarika Since we had no plan of attacking Dvarika, the question of entering Anarta never came up After setting up camp on the bank of the Subhramati, we discussed the strategy of the army It was the suggestion of the commander-in-chief that, before launching an attack on Surashtra, an envoy should be despatched to Dvarika to enquire if Sri Krishna was there or not He also desired that large salvers of gems, diamonds, gold and royal vestures should be offered as gifts to the ruler of Dvarika More than a suggestion and a wish, it was an order To implement the order, five envoys started their journey to Dvarika Why General Karna despatched those gifts to the ruler of Dvarika was not known to us—nor would we ever know

We waited eagerly in the Subhramati camp for news from the envoys A patch of desert lay between us and Surashtra, so the horse-soldiers busied themselves in bathing and cleaning the horses in the Subhramati's waters The elephants would not be needed at all in this part of the land, because grains of sand getting in their eyes could be very troublesome So we decided the best thing was to leave the elephant contingent behind and march ahead with foot-soldiers On our return from Surashtra this elephant contingent would meet us Apart from this, there was the problem of a large population of lions on Raivataka mountain This was part of the reason for our decision to protect our elephants by leaving them behind

After four days, the envoys to Dvarika returned with the news that the ruler of Dvarika, Sri Krishna, was not in the city He had gone to Dvaitavana, with his brother Balarama, to meet the Pandavas Our gifts were accepted in his absence by his *purohita*, the rishi Brahmagargya Sri Krishna's wives—Rukmini, Satyabhama, Mitravrinda, Kalindi, Lakshmana, Bhadra, and Satya—were in the city His sons—Pradyumna, Charudeshna, Sudeshna, Bhanu, Bhaumarika, Chitragu, Vegavata, Ashvasena, Praharana, Jaya, Ayu, Anila, Unnada, Harsha, Oja, Prabhosha, Mahashakti, Subahu, Bhadra, and Shanti—immediately

"Why is this river called the Ashvanadi?"

"Because the horses here drink from this river and from none other," father and son replied in one voice

Having toured the whole palace, we came to the spacious courtyard in front, an area filled with arbours As we emerged, Bhaiya's foot accidentally struck a stone Lucky that he had impenetrable skin-armour and so was not hurt His golden hair was spread all over his neck He raised his eyebrows and looked up

"Why do you let these stones remain in the open?" he asked the two rajas, glancing at the balustrade They were seeing us off at the palace entrance

"It's done deliberately When Kunti used to be here, Maharshi Durvasas came here once and performed a huge *yajna* These are the stones used for the sacred fire-pit A thatched hut was specially constructed for the irascible sage somewhere here According to our minister, the *yajna* was a memorable one Some great good must have resulted from it," Kuntibhoja informed us The locks of his white beard trembled gently in the soft breeze of the arbour

"Durvasas! Shon, I had nearly forgotten! It was—it was Durvasas who instructed me to sip daily, without fail, the ashes of burnt gold-leaf mixed in lotus water I forgot to do so during this campaign Remind me about it at the next halt in our campaign," Bhaiya told me

We affectionately took leave of Kuntibhoja and Purujit in their beautifully decorated city of Bhojapura in the month of Chaitra—in order to launch an attack on the kingdom of Surashtra, and subjugate Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti

In a few days, at the foothills of the Nishadha range, near the source of the Charmanvati river, the powerful, heavily populated city of Vinda and Anuvinda called Avanti came within our sight The Bandudhvayas challenged us with the might of Himalayan peaks, but after three days these two cousins of Krishna, sons of Rajadhi Devi, surrendered to us Avanti fell

19

After Avanti, we crossed the Mahi river and, passing through Malava, marched onward Clad in the exquisite finery of springtime, *asana*, *loghra*, *dhera*, *panavali* and other trees swayed happily The cold breeze that blew in from the western ocean

though we were aware that the Viratas were affluent and strong. We were in fact a stone's throw away from Hastinapura—a simple crossing of the Yamuna would take us back in the kingdom of the Kauravas. Should we need it, assistance of any kind was available at short notice from Hastinapura. The conquest of the Matsyas promised to be an easy affair.

We clashed with the Virata raja in hand-to-hand combat in one of the central localities of Viratanagara. The flatness of the land made it possible for our elephants to create havoc in the ranks of his army. The general of the Viratas, Kichaka, poured in his elephant forces to stem the onslaught, but our overwhelming superiority in numbers made short shrift of his effort. Hundreds of Virata soldiers lost their lives, trampled and pulped by our charging elephants. Panic-stricken cattle fled helter-skelter in all directions, making a shambles of the fertile grazing grounds. As he did with others in the past, our commander-in-chief disarmed the Virata raja, looped his bow round the enemy's neck, tugged it sharply, and said, "King, what are you going to do with these cows? I suggest that you despatch, today itself, as many cows as you can in the direction of Hastinapura." The humbled Virata nodded his head in agreement. The ruler of Matsya bowed his head before the victorious banner of the Kaurava army. And so our campaign of conquest found fulfilment also in the southern regions beyond Hastinapura. Now it was the turn of the western region. The month of Chaitra was drawing to a close. Our plan was to subdue the kingdoms of Kulinda, Trigarta, Vahlika, Madra, Rohataka, Kekaya, and Kamboja before the melting snows from the Himalayas unleashed floods in the rivers. Our army's numbers swelled daily with the additions of soldiers we received in the form of tribute.

We stood at the main doors of the palace prior to our departure from Viratanagara. I trailed the Raja of Anga on my horse. Behind me came the elephant contingent. For an instant I waited at the threshold of the main door for the Raja of Anga to go first. One of the elephants, who was ceaselessly swinging his trunk, accidentally chanced to knock off my headgear. The helmet toppled on to the stone floor and rolled to a standstill. The noise made the Raja of Anga turn and ask, "What is the matter, Shon?"

"My helmet fell off." I dismounted and stooped to retrieve it.

"Is that an ill omen?" Even as he said this, that excited elephant placed his foot on the helmet, crushing it before I could get to it.

summoned a royal council to receive our gifts Sri Krishna's uncle's son Uddhava sang lavish praises of our victorious commander-in-chief in that meeting

We were ready now to leave Anarta and attack Surashtra Annexing the territory of Prabhasa, we skirted Raivataka mountain and overwhelmed Girinagara, whose raja Suratha acknowledged our victory

We had strung so many flowers of victory in our garland of conquest that more than half of it had already been completed Accepting the tribute of the Pravalas in Surashtra, we moved forward along the bank of the Subhramati The elephant contingent we had left behind re-joined us in the kingdom of Sauvira Then, in swirls of dust, began the next phase of our campaign

We left the city of Siddhapura behind and arrived at the ashram of the sage Vashishtha on the lower slope of Pariyatra mountain We had heard that the Pariyatra mountain was a treasure house of caves This mountain range stretched many *yojanas* from north to south The huge stretch of desert that ringed this range far exceeded anything in Surashtra It was a very long range, but the peaks were all bare One missed the thick foliage that greened the other ranges Only neem, walnut and similar trees, and arches of swallowwort and thorny shrubbery covered the black and white stones The territory itself was known as Desert-Land The paucity of water created distances of as much as fifty *yojanas* between one village and another So there was no question of battle Nearby was Jayadratha's kingdom Sindhu Realising the size and strength of the Kaurava forces, he sent his tribute in advance

Ahead lay the kingdom of the Viratas called Matsya, ruled by Raja Virata, whose son Uttara was a total military failure So the responsibility of administration and defence rested on Raja Virata's aging back From the city of Shibi in Sindhu, we recrossed the desert to attack Virata

Leaving behind Pushkara, Upaplavya and other towns nestling in the valley of the Pariyatra range, as well as the desert, we came upon vast fields of rolling grass Because of these luxuriant grasslands, the cattle population of Virata excelled all other kingdoms of Aryavarta in quantity and quality Everywhere we could see grazing herds of healthy cows

We arrived at the frontiers of Matsya Five *yojanas* ahead lay the capital Viratanagara We were fully confident of victory

that ran from their sources in the Himalayas through these king-doms into the western ocean, making the region fertile, prosper-ous, and powerful We made Shalya, the Raja of Madra, our main target because we were sure that with his fall all the other minor kingdoms would voluntarily surrender Shalya was the maternal uncle of Sahadeva and Nakula, and the son of Ritayana So we speedily crossed the Shatadru river in order to reach the city of Shakala

Shakala, the capital of Madra, was situated at the charming confluence of the Chandrabhaga and the Vitasta A confrontation with Shalya was inevitable The instant he heard that the Kaurava forces were approaching to attack his kingdom, he left the capital, taking with him his sons, Rukmanga and Rukmaratha, and estab lished his defence on the upper reaches to prevent us from crossing the Purushni river Of the many opponents that we had encoun-tered so far, Shalya was the only one extraordinarily adept in the arts of guile and subterfuge

To confront him, we launched hundreds of boats filled with armed soldiers They had not reached even mid river when they were suddenly struck by numerous logs floating downstream The naval formation broke up, many capsized, and drifted like so many straws down the currents of the Purushni Meanwhile, the archers of Shalya began systematically sniping at the floundering soldiers With the exception of a handful, the entire convoy of boats was wiped out Shalya's manoeuvre was wonderfully successful

In the hope that elephants would succeed where the boats had failed we ordered a strong contingent of 500 elephants into the river Shalya had another ruse ready to outwit and ruin us He had spikes embedded in reverse in the floating logs As oon as the outward-pointing spikes pierced their hides, the lacerated ele-phants shifted direction and drifted away in the currents Their blood crimsoned the waters of the Purushni Only tl e river knows where the elephants finally ended up From the upper reaches Shalya could easily spot Bhaiya holding his gleaming golden scep tre

For three days we tried our utmost to cross the river, but to no avail The shadow of frustration began to cloud our hopes Every day hundreds of soldiers lost their lives for no reason at all, in an attempt to swim across the river This had to end sometime or other What was the point of losing precious lives without actually fighting?

20

Leaving Viratanagara, we marched ahead at the swiftest speed possible Passing by Kurukshetra, crossing the Drishadvati river, our army surrounded the Kulinda capital, Chandanavati Raja Kulinda was getting on in years, his adopted son Chandrahas had arrived in a chariot to supervise the defence Raja Kulinda had chanced upon Chandrahas in a forest, and he had taken this opportunity to repay his debt It did not occur to him that though his name was Chandrahas, the "Smile of the Moon", our commander-in-chief was no less, being a "Pupil of the Sun"

The battle took place at the bank of the Sarasvati river Chandrahas was an expert horseman He streaked like lightning through the ranks of his soldiers His thunderous shouts inspired confidence among the Kulindas With unerring accuracy, Hiranya-varman fired an arrow at that valiant and illustrious warrior The shaft pierced his horse's neck, the brave warrior with his horse toppled like an uprooted *kimshuka* tree into the waters of the Sarasvati Unable to spot its young leader, the Kulinda army fled in confusion

None of the kingdoms we had conquered possessed an army with dedication enough to continue to fight after injury to its leader In order to ensure that such an unfortunate eventuality never overtook our own army, our commander-in-chief would make it a point of sometimes dismounting and asking me to announce falsely that the General, the Raja of Anga, had been wounded He would then walk over to the possible escape route and shrewdly stand there at an angle Whichever groups of soldiers tried to retreat found heavy punishment awaiting them The would-be escapees were ordered to cook food that day for the entire army As a result, the soldiers had got used to fighting to the last gasp We were so immersed in strict discipline that I even forgot that Meghamala came from the kingdom of Kulinda

Having defeated Chandanavati, and after overwhelming the kingdoms of Vahlika and Trigarta, we arrived near the Shatadru river Ahead of us lay the tiny kingdoms of Rohataka, Kekaya and Yadu Only one offered any serious challenge—Shalya's Madra These kingdoms formed a confederacy called the Panchanada—an appropriate name, the "Five Rivers"—because the Shatadru, Purushni, Chandrabhaga, Vitasta, and Sindhu were the five rivers

why—was he thinking what announcement he would make next morning, or was he offering shraddha to his personal deity?

Emerging from the river, he said with conviction, "Brave warriors, it is time for us to attack and conquer the Madra city of Shakalanagara "

"How?" I asked in bedwilderment Surprise and incredulity were written also on the faces of the other army chiefs

"You, Shon, will hold the sceptre and keep moving among the army ranks Shalya on the other bank will think that it is I with the sceptre With two *akshauhinis* from the rear, I will re-cross the Shatadru Proceeding along its bank towards its source, I will pass through the kingdoms of Kuluta and Druhyu, then, crossing the Purushni and Chandrabhaga at their sources, I shall enter the kingdom of Rohataka Shakalanagara lies midway from there On one side will be your army, on the other my forces, poised in the rear—and Shalya trapped between us "

"But this will take a whole week What will we do till then?"

"You? You will order batches of a hundred elephants each into the Purushni and continue harassing Shalya When you see Shalya slowly withdrawing from the other bank, you will understand that I have surrounded Shakalanagara "

"But but won't this manoeuvre be considered as an attack on an unprepared adversary?"

"No As soon as I reach the outskirts of Shakalanagara, I will send messengers to Shalya with the clear warning that if he wishes to save his capital he should instantly withdraw from the Purushni If he doesn't turn back, there will be no occasion to fight, because there is not much of his army left to defend Shakalanagara In any case, I will return only after I have lowered his flag from the palace top and hoisted the flag of the Kauravas "

"As you say!" I took the Kaurava sceptre from his hand, leapt up on Vayujit, and began marching up and down in the ranks of the Kaurava army, holding the sceptre aloft so that it gleamed conspicuously The truth was that even as I mounted Vayujit I had a slight reservation

Sections of the rear divisions of our army slowly detached themselves They had not engaged yet in actual battle, for which reason they were fighting fit Under Bhaiya's leadership, they displayed a superb enthusiasm Crossing the Shatadru, they proceeded to the sources of the five rivers of Panchanada My movements caused a

The fourth day we saw a figure dressed in white coming in a boat towards us from the other shore Our soldiers readied their weapons, to give vent to their suppressed fury

"Wait!" The peremptory order of their commander-in-chief left the soldiers stunned and wondering But they realised the nature of the confusion as the boat drew nearer It brought an envoy of Raja Shalya

Alighting from the boat, the enterprising envoy approached our commander-in-chief He refrained from even the elementary formality of greeting It was easy for him to make out our commander-in-chief from among us because of the flesh-ear-rings

"A message! From Shalya, the Maharaja of Madra!" Speaking slowly, he handed over a bundle to our commander-in-chief, who passed it on to me saying, "Second-in-command, read it "

I removed the silk covering impatiently and read "Intelligent Kshatriyas know that war-dharma is their business, it is not the business of sons of charioteers So, go back the same way you came "

Anger inflamed my nostrils Such an open, grievous insult! And an insult to, of all people, my brother who had reduced so many rajas to abject subjugation! And from such a mean individual as Shalya!

I held the bark-parchment at an angle with the intention of tearing it to pieces and trampling it

"Wait, Shon! Give it to me " The Raja of Anga took the parchment, silk wrapping included, in his hands He returned the silk wrapping to the envoy of Raja Shalya and, pointing a finger towards the Purushni river, ordered him silently to leave He returned by the same boat by which he arrived The Raja of Anga slipped the roll of parchment securely in his waist-belt

"You may all leave now I will issue orders tomorrow "

Hiding our sense of outrage, we did as he said Our commander-in-chief, who roared like thunder on the field of battle, spent the entire day standing in the waters of the Purushni, offering *anjali* and *arghya* Thinking *This is the end of the campaign of world-conquest*, our soldiers were prepared now for the worst All night Bhaiya performed a series of *anjalis* in the Purushni, while we tossed sleepless in our beds

The fifth day dawned The Raja of Anga, to the surprise of all, had stood all night in the Purushni It was difficult to guess

"See that this Raja of Madra makes full restitution for them...and..." He took out Shalya's birch-parchment message from his waist-belt. Handing it to me, he looped his victorious bow on Shalya's neck, jerked it sharply and said, "Get this blindly arrogant and uncivilised Kshatriya raja to write on the back of the parchment—not once but five times—that sons of charioteers also are intelligent and expert in the art of war, sometimes much more so than some self-styled Kshatriyas."

The veins on his forehead bulged. His jaws throbbed.

22

News of Shalya's defeat spread on its own in the land of the five rivers. The neighbouring territories of the Barbaras, the Yavanas, the Shashakas and the Kambojas fell easily under our control. Only after we had collected tribute from them and obtained war reparations from Shalya did we leave Panchanada. That ended the campaign in the west, because Shalya happened to be the most powerful ruler of that region.

The month of Vaishakha commenced. Five months had passed since we left our homeland. One hardly realises how swiftly days of happiness and days of warfare pass. At least the speed never strikes the minds of soldiers.

One more territory left—the north, which comprised only five kingdoms. Our plan was to mop up these kingdoms in the month of Vaishakha itself, before the onset of the monsoon, and return immediately to Hastinapura. We had to ensure that our army did not get bogged down in the slushy onslaught of the rains.

With Kashmira as our target we forged swiftly ahead. Kashmira! No area of Aryavarta excelled Kashmira in scenic beauty. It was in Kashmira that we had our first glimpse of the Himalayan peaks. The victory cries of our general would soon be resounding in the mist-shrouded slopes of the mountains. One visualised Kashmira as the auspicious tilak beauty spot on the forehead of Aryavarta herself, personified as the goddess of Nature blossoming with youthful loveliness. I had listened to poets and pundits in the royal assembly of Hastinapura extolling Kashmira as the image of heaven itself on earth. However, my actual impression of the place was entirely different. Heaven is conspicuous by one skyey colour only—blue. But Kashmira's earth is drenched with such a range of

flurry in the flag-chariot of Shalya on the opposite bank He laboured under the misconception that I was the Raja of Anga riding milk-white Vayujit and waving his sceptre Every day we despatched a force of hundred elephants into the river, to be wiped out systematically by Shalya, who was in high spirits as he moved among his army formation

Five days later we observed a strange commotion in Shalya's ranks In a short time the entire opposite bank was bare of soldiers The Raja of Anga had sped like a whirlwind and ringed the city of Shakalanagara We were sure of that Shalya had indeed abandoned the opposite bank, it seemed as if a *yakshini*-fairy had waved her magic wand and depopulated the area

Elated, we launched countless war-boats into the river with shouts of victory

"Victory to our General, Maharaja Karna of Anga!"

Even the Purushni which swept away so many of our elephants must have trembled at the vibrations of these victory cries

21

We clashed in hand-to-hand combat with Shalya's forces on the field outside Shakalanagara It proved to be a total rout for Shalya I personally disarmed Shalya and brought him captive before our commander-in-chief His muscular neck was bent in defeat But the price we had to pay for humbling him was the loss of Vyaghradatta and Hiranyavarman

"Free him," came the order We untied Shalya's hands

'Shalya, you are the lord of Madra, which is after all ringed by uncivilised kingdoms like the Shashakas, the Yavanas, and the Barbaras We never expected dignified behaviour from you, and we never will Never forget—noisy currents like you that splash at the feet of hills can never look up at and hope to crown mountains ' Fire seemed to emit from the blue eyes of our commander-in-chief His cheeks were like bright red cactus buds The veins on his sweating forehead stood out thick The tip of his nose was blood red It was because of Shalya that we managed to get a glimpse of this righteous indignation aspect of his character

"Shon, how many boats and elephants of ours have been lost in the waters of the Purushni?"

'Around seven hundred," I replied

ended and the hilly slopes greeted our eyes. The Himalayas! It was as if the Creator of the universe had unsheathed his razor-sharp sword from its scabbard and was standing before us in the form of a massive mountain peak. Melting snow cascaded down the slopes; in order to prevent the evil eye falling on the shining peaks, pure white clouds had ringed the mountain tops; it seemed as if the goddess Uma had modestly draped cloud-vesture around herself, embarrassed because Shiva was staring at her from the high distant peak of sacred Kailasa.

The peak from different angles presented different shapes—sometimes like a white-haired meditating rishi, sometimes like a perpendicular flagstaff, sometimes like a powerful hand upthrust from the earth, reaching out to caress the sky.

The Raja of Anga expressed his bhakti by kneeling before the mountain. He remained in that kneeling posture for quite some time his eyes closed, murmuring to himself, with his palms folded, his face calm and serene. His flesh-ear-rings were reflected in the melting snows. After some time he stood up.

We proceeded next to the kingdom of Darada. After the conquest of Darada we progressed along the lower reaches of the Himalayas. The elephant contingent we had left behind was instructed to re-join us in the kingdom of Tangana. The multifaceted grandeur of the Himalayas enchanted us. What an extensive kingdom this was, spread over how many *yojanas*! Such milk-white clouds, of distilled purity! As we crossed the crystal clear waters of the river, and entered the kingdom of Tangana, we experienced a biting chill in the air. We marvelled at the fortitude of the Ganganans who had to face the rigours of winter because we knew too well how cold springtime could be here. The Tanganans were poorly equipped militarily. They welcomed us and offered to pay tribute, treating us to a delicious feast of the edible *borasa* flower.

Crowds of ideas overwhelmed us as we left the territory of Tangana and marched towards Himavan. Here was an opportunity for us to glimpse the source of the Ganga, the birthplace of the world-mothering river, the ultimate beginning of the all-beneficent merit-providing holy river—Gangotri.

We entered the kingdom of Himavan with a select contingent of troops. We instructed the rest of the army to return to Hastinapura, adding that they should camp at the outskirts of the city until we came back. The kingdom of Himavan was filled with various

colours that if the gods were to open the windows of their palaces and gaze down on this fascinating spectrum they would surely renounce heaven immediately. Kashmira was indeed a parallel heaven of celestial, variegated, mind-ravishing, freedom-inspiring beauty.

We set foot in Kashmira at the height of spring. No matter how stone-hearted a person might be, a vision of the captivating natural beauty of Kashmira during spring time is guaranteed to instil in him a feeling of sensitive humility. Had Ashvatthaman been with us he would surely have removed his head gear in ecstasy and flung it towards the sky. He would have sprawled on a field of soft silk grass and gazed wonderingly hours on end at the intense blueness of the sky, and listened intently to the symphony of bird song inspired by Nature bursting into flower. Roaming in the slopes and valleys, observing the countless miniscule flowers waving everywhere he would surely have asked the Raja of Anga, "Where is the weapon that can conquer this flowery kingdom? How will you fathom the depths of these valleys? How ascend these mountains? No, Raja of Anga, man may conquer everything, but there is no way of conquering the immeasurable wealth of Nature." He was born with an instinctive love for Nature. He had succeeded in communicating his enthusiasm to Bhaiya as well. Could it be that our general had left his elephant contingent behind simply because he did not want to see the natural beauty of Kashmira harmed? Only our foot soldiers marched ahead on the road to the magnificent capital called Suryanagara.

On our way we chanced across numerous lakes, covered with blue, yellow, golden, white, blood-red, ochre and other colourful lotuses. Swarms of buzzing bees sipped their nectar and circled round flocks of male swans sailing obliviously across the surface of the lake. The lake surface was filled with gracefully floating lotus leaves. Kashmira was a wondrous togethering of lakes, flowers, birds, creepers and low, moist, alluvial plains.

Conquering Suryanagara, we marched ahead for a darshan of the Himalayas. Deodars, *suruparnas*, and pine trees were left behind us. *Chandolas*, red sheldrakes, *chatakas*, pigeons, *bharadvajas*, *sarangas* and other birds constantly reminded us, "You are moving towards the Himalayas—go gently, go humbly." We passed by flower-gardens and groves of plantain trees, queen-of-the-night, *madanashara* and other flowers, until the plains

to Karna " May the human Himalaya stand forever so, with folded palms, in front of the hills of the Himalayas May the chakra of the forever whirling Spirit of Time stop

After a three-day halt at the banks of the Gangotri we proceeded towards Badri Innumerable Shiva-lingas sanctified the road We placed floral homage at these lingas and arrived at Haridvara from Shonitapura Haridvara, the source of the river Sarayu, was the last city in our campaign of world-conquest And so the northern part of our campaign ended, and we made preparations for our return journey to Hastinapura, where we would finally find time to relax our bodies and minds weary with wars, battles and pilgrimages After paying homage to the Sarayu we began our journey home to Hastinapura

Vaishakha was about to give over About six months had elapsed since we left home, and we had no inkling what had transpired in Hastinapura since our absence My mind was irresistibly pulled towards the city Family memories, suppressed so long in the din and bustle of war, now began bubbling up They gathered around my mind and began dancing wildly

23

From Haridvara we crossed the Ganga and arrived at the town limits of Hastinapura The sight of the capital after six months of absence produced a fountain of miscellaneous emotions Our disciplined and well organised army was waiting for us—foot-soldiers in the front, the elephant contingent at the rear, and the cavalry in the middle The procession of the victorious army would march through the city with festive accompaniment In the meantime, artists had been commissioned to decorate with colourful designs the trunks, temples, foreheads, ears and other parts of the elephants Beautiful howdahs were placed on the elephant backs, and the mahouts had doffed their war-uniforms and donned courtiers' dresses Their goads were covered with golden foils. Shiny zari-worked saddles were strapped on horses' backs Leather reins were discarded, and attractive reins of silk threads thickly twined were provided Flower garlands were placed round the necks of all elephants and horses The vermillion powder smeared on the animals' foreheads immediately attracted the attention of observers The soldiers had removed their armour and put on festive

large and small pilgrimage spots There was no way of establishing a single unified kingdom in that area Not just us, even the entire assembly of the rajas of Aryavarta, attacking concertedly, would have failed to integrate that territory

The truth of the matter was our campaign had ended and plans for the return journey were afoot

Leaving behind us the lingam of Kedara, we arrived at Yamunotri The source of the Yamuna! The life-giving origin of the ebullient Yamuna! The spring that flows eternal from the peaks of the Himalayas! The playful, ecstatic, bubbling girl in the pure white laps of the Himalaya! Taking the Yamuna's waters in his palms to perform *anjali* for the *arghya* ritual, Bhaiya removed his military uniform and donned a simple white shawl It was now possible to see the incredible muscles that rippled on his arms as a result of his use of numerous weapons of war in the battles he had fought in his campaign of world conquest

The pure water of the Yamuna slipped gracefully from the pure cupped hollow of his palms into the pure flowing waters below '*Om! Bhurbhuvah svah!*' His eyes were closed I could not tell what dazzled more—the white Himalayas or the golden brilliance of his impenetrable skin-armour I could not make out whether he was a world conquering general or an all-renouncing atman-subduing sannyasi

Camping for a day near Yamunotri, we began our trek to Gangotri Not a trace of any human sound here The only sound was the down-rushing noise of cataracts Who can conquer the Himalayas? You can go there only on a pilgrimage

We came upon the magnificent Stone of Bhagiratha at Gangotri After bathing in the river our victorious general lay down on the stone Soon after, he rose and stood in the rippling waves of the Ganga His golden shield like back started heating in the rays of the sun He gazed fixedly in the direction of the sun with his neck tilted up Absolute peace pervaded the area For an instant I wished that the chakra of Kala, the cosmic wheel that makes dancing puppets of human beings, would stop I wanted my Vasu Bhaiya to remain exactly and permanently like this—the sky-shattering conqueror, the man of blameless behaviour, the supremely handsome bodied individual May that thousand rayed sun shine forever so on his forehead May the cleansing Ganga which lapped at his feet forever murmur sweetly, "Victory, victory

Holding Duryodhana's hand, the Raja of Anga slowly walked over to the tip of the arrow-shaped army formation. In his other hand he held the ancient royal sceptre of the Kauravas, the symbol of their dignity, the vanquisher of all the rajas of the land That symbol of Kaurava pride glinted in the first rays of the sun.

All preparations had been made on the bank of the Ganga for the victorious royal procession. Anticipating the arrival of the rainy season, the *chataka* birds, hidden in the thick greenery of the kadamba trees, raised plangent, raucous cries to the sky The monsoon was around the corner. I had always considered the monsoon the most lavishly generous of all the seasons, because it donated pluvian wealth in such abundance.

The planner had executed an *alpana* of an auspicious swastika with such precision that the chariot of the general could be stationed exactly on it, facing the tip of the arrowhead army formation. Bhaiya positioned himself exactly on the centre spot where the four arms of the swastika joined. The entire limitless oceanic army was behind him, from the tip of the arrowhead to the feathered tail.

The royal charioteer Pratikaman drove up in a splendidly decorated chariot. Though meant to be pulled by six horses, only five had been harnessed to it. They were all pure white, but what drew one's attention was the empty space in front where the missing horse should have been.

"What's the matter, Pratikaman, why only five horses?" the general asked, lifting his head as he stood in the centre of the swastika.

"This is the tradition of this chariot. The Queen Mother Kuntidevi used this chariot for her personal needs. From then on all the charioteers yoked only five horses to it. That is why, Maharaja, I also yoke only five." Pratikaman trembled as he said this perhaps because he wanted to establish that he was not to blame.

"Couldn't you find any other chariot to bring here?"

"No, Raja of Anga, that is not the reason. There are any number of chariots, but it was I who ordered Pratikaman to drive this one. I want all the citizens to have your darshan. For this to happen it was necessary to remove the canopy of some chariot or other, and what's the harm of removing the canopy of the so-called Queen Mother's chariot?" Raja Duryodhana chuckled as he said this, his pink eyes shining.

royal clothing. They still brandished swords, daggers and tridents, whose pointed ends shone like sun-rays as if announcing to the citizens of Hastinapura, "Rise, welcome your world-conquering general!"

If one weapon were to be singled out as of special use to us during our conquering campaign, it was the arrow. That was why the army chiefs had organised their formations with great care in the shape of an arrow, the tip of which was now about to enter the heart of Hastinapura

Only three were present to welcome us at the town limits—Raja Duryodhana, Ashvatthaman and Satyasena.

Striding forward with hand upraised, and smiling as his feet squelched through the sand, forgetting that he was the Raja of the Kauravas, Raja Duryodhana held the Raja of Anga in a tight embrace. He seemed even to forget that he had a garland in his hands to place round the neck of the Raja of Anga. Finally it occurred to him that this formality had to be performed. Tying a small queen-of-the-night wristlet on Karna, he said with a heavy throbbing voice, "Raja of Anga, today my dream has found its fulfilment The Pandavas who one by one performed their world-conquest have finally woken to the fact that there is another warrior in Aryavarta who can perform the world-conquest all by himself, and that warrior is Karna, a close friend of Duryodhana, the Raja of the Kauravas." His shawl flapped in the soft breeze that blew from the Ganga.

The world-conquering general smiled without saying a word. Noticing that Ashvatthaman's head did not have its customary white covering, Karna raised his brows and, embracing the son of his guru, asked, "Why are you wearing pink head gear today, Ashvatthaman?"

"How could I possibly welcome a world-conquering hero in the white vesture of renunciation? That is why I preferred the pink dress of success and fulfilment. This is the first time in my life that I have worn a head gear other than white. Why, don't you like it?"

"No, it's not that. I like it."

Satyasena stepped forward and touched Bhaiya's feet.

"Tell me, Satyasena, is all well at home?" This was the first time that he had enquired after the welfare of family members. And it had to be Satyasena.

"Maharaja, all is well," Satyasena said humbly.

tabors, *dindimas*, *tantu*-vina, trumpets and other instruments outdid each other in simultaneous noise-making It seemed as if the victory-cries and the musical instruments were furiously competing The moment Satyasena cracked his whip, the chariot horses leapt forward, and the arrow-formation moved ahead The royal procession had commenced My heart filled with pride, joy, affection, heroic valour and other related feelings This was the supreme city, Hastinapura of Aryavarta, where Vasu-bhaiya and I had apprehensively first set foot outside our home And today in every road of the city, in every chowk, in every balcony, numerous citizens would be offering *arati* with light-filled eyes to my elder brother, and I would stand behind him, observing the ritual worship And for an instant I felt that life should end this very moment What is the finest kind of death? Surely that which comes when one has reached the pinnacle of one's ambitions Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought of this I looked at the expression on Bhaiya's face to surmise how profoundly all these events had affected him His face was totally serene, as calm as the bed of a river There wasn't even the vaguest flicker on his face that could be associated with self-pride, nor the happiness which bubbles up in a person when he receives the unwavering accolade of a populace His face, like the golden statue of Surya in the Kaurava royal assembly hall, was all radiant

The arrow formation marched slowly forward After an interminable period of six months, Hastinapura, all bedecked, appeared before us to welcome two charioteer's sons transformed into illustrious generals Proclamations rained on us All areas were flooded with radiant shafts of joy A vibrant energy seemed to fill every nook and corner This city could never have witnessed such an auspicious day since the time of its foundation In what kingdom could thousands of Kshatriyas ever have praised sons of charioteers with such guileless, total, affection filled, bhakti drenched appreciation? These thoughts made tears of joy stream down my cheeks The success of a lifetime's efforts was reflected in those tears I had not the slightest desire to wipe them away I wanted them to stream for ever, till the end of time

I could see the city in front of me, blurred through my tear-filled eyes Trees, houses, forts, temples—all appeared dusky, dust-covered But I wiped my eyes with my shawl only after I glimpsed the outline of my thatch leaf hut Bhaiya had told me all about the

"Excellent I was clever enough to be able to save the lives of my soldiers, and you were equally clever in utilising one of the Pandavas' chariots and so saving one of the Kauravas'. But how could it have escaped your attention that a five-horsed chariot looks positively displeasing? I'll attend to this shortcoming by having my own steed Vayujit yoked to the chariot " The Raja of Anga stepped out of the centre of the swastika, and took the reins of Vayujit from my hands into his Leading Vayujit to the chariot he yoked him in the empty space The swiftest courser in Aryavarta, Vayujit, appeared taller than the five horses behind him Decorated with the various ornaments from the defeated rajas of numerous kingdoms, with a zari-embroidered saddle, his head embellished with multi-coloured feather head-gear, his skin glossy white like Himalayan snows—naturally all eyes were riveted on him

The chariot stopped on the swastika As I had always done earlier, I climbed the steps of the chariot in order to act as my dear brother's charioteer Preventing me, Vasu-bhaiya said, "Shon, you are no more a charioteer You are the second-in-command of this victorious army Come up and hold this royal standard Satyasena will be the charioteer "

I climbed down, went to the rear of the chariot, stepped up and, holding the royal standard, stationed myself on the right of the Raja of Anga Raja Duryodhana stood on his left, on his left was Ashvatthaman, whose pink head-dress fluttered in the wind The Raja of Anga stood in the centre with folded palms He had refused to take off his general's uniform, and there were dirt spots on his body Notwithstanding he stood out among the four of us—for one thing he was holding the royal sceptre, for another he was the tallest among us

The soldiers standing nearby ceaselessly scattered fragrant champak, queen-of-the-night, *parijata* and other colourful flowers on the chariot The sky was ablaze with flung fistfuls of kumkum powder Someone announced loudly "Victory to the world-conquering hero, Maharaja Karna of Anga!"

"Victory to him!"

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers in the arrow-shaped formation rent the sky with their cries The blue sky seemed to vibrate with the noise The leaves of trees and the blades of grass trembled, and shouted "Victory! Victory!" Drums, conches, war

Anga! General Karna... victory to you! Victory to you heroic Karna!"

My body felt as light as the silk threads of my shawl. I seemed to be swimming, bobbing on the waves of the victory cries. Our arrowhead formation slowly inched forward. The whole body of Satyasena was covered with kumkum. The white-skinned horses were all now the colour of kumkum. Such a day—so intoxicating, spreading so rare a splendour, rousing feelings even out of inert depths—had never before entered our lives, and was not likely to do so in the future, so it seemed. Such an abundance of affection, such sky-touching enthusiasm!

What greater moulding of a divine image could there be from ordinary stone?

We arrived at the palace, from whose top fluttered the triangular saffron royal pennant, hoisted by the chief advisor Vidura. Was there anything that had not happened in this palace? Was there anything that had not been witnessed by this architectural stone monarch? Vasu-bhaiya insulted as the son of a charioteer. The student of bowcraft ignored by Drona, the Guru of archery. A hero worthy of royal ladies, yet facing the daughter of a charioteer on the wedding altar... A bhakta full of shraddha walking to the river with a shawl over his shoulder.... The stones of this palace had indeed seen everything. Yet what they were witnessing today was unique: they were observors of world-conquering Karna.

Grandfather Bhishma was standing at the main gate. The royal procession halted. The miscellaneous sound of the drums ceased. Seeing Pitamaha, I recalled briefly the incident of his throwing the sceptre in the royal assembly.

Forgetting the past, a large-minded Kaurava—no, a high-born archer—stood there to welcome another great archer.

The Raja of Anga stepped out of his chariot, and coming forward handed his sceptre into the hands of Pitamaha Bhishma. For an instant he looked at the white-bearded handsome face and...for a while, overwhelmed by the tumultuous welcome of the citizens, the heart of this hero, no corner of which had so far been affected, suddenly melted. Tears sparkled in his blue eyes. He seemed to fall near the threshold of the main door, touched Grandfather's feet and said in a quavering voice, "Your blessings, Pitamaha."

"Be victorious, Karna. May victory be yours." Pitamaha Bhishma lifted him up by his shoulders. The sceptre shook in his

endless glories of the thatch-leaf hut when I was in Champanagari, which is why I gazed fixedly at it It was the thatch-leaf hut of Vidura ji At the door, like a statue, stood a short lady dressed in white, unrecognisable from a distance She was standing on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the illustrious son of a charioteer arriving as a general in the royal procession Our chariot came up to the hut of Vidura-ji, and I could see her clearly now I looked at her in surprise, because no other woman in the city would be so bold as to stand as she did in front of her door She was the Queen Mother, Kunti Devi From the thatched hut emerged an ashram girl carrying a pot filled with water I saw the Queen Mother stop her, hand her a bowl and say something to her

Stepping forward, the ashram girl poured the water from the pot on the hooves of the horses, and said to Satyasena, 'Will the General please take the trouble of alighting from the chariot? I wish to place kumkum on his forehead'

No' replied Satyasena It must be that Duryodhana had instructed Satyasena to speak in this manner

Satyasena rein the horses I m alighting' The slow, resonant voice of the Raja of Anga boomed

No sooner had the chariot halted than Bhaiya jumped down The determined ashram girl put kumkum on his handsome forehead It had not struck me that, though all the preparations for the royal procession had been made, no one had yet applied auspicious kumkum on our General's forehead That ashram girl had so effortlessly made good that omission The Raja of Anga removed the topaz ring from his little finger and placed it in the girl's kumkum bowl The royal procession moved ahead The sun rose high

The Kauravas were preparing to welcome back Karna after he had made supreme and invincible their royal power. The entire city was dotted with decorated doorways, covered with mango and *ashoka* leaves Married ladies painted *alpanas* in their courtyards and sprinkled musk and saffron scented water on the roads Flags decorated with flowers conversed with the sky From every balcony citizens were showering golden flowers They filled the city streets like crowded star clusters Water pots were emptied on the hooves of Vayujit, and our hearts also became pots of over flowing gratitude The drumsticks of the praise chanters beat on the sky shaped drums 'Victory to you, General Karna, Raja of

for you to hand the sceptre today to me instead of to Pitamaha Bhishma "

"King, assume that it is in your hands Should any calamitous event occur now, Grandfather Bhishma will take up arms on your behalf I gave him the sceptre deliberately in order that this could be assured The Raja of Anga, Duryodhana and Pitamaha Bhishma—this trinity can never be broken now "

He placed his foot on the last step Ashvatthaman, the speaker of profundities, was immersed in deep thought We went to the Assembly Hall in order to have a darshan of the image of the Sun deity The crackling heat of Vaishakha blazed outside Flames seemed to leaping up

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The very next day preparations for the banquet started Raja Duryodhana, Duhshasana, maternal uncle, Jayadratha, all the princes, and others were present Because it was his custom to cook his own meal in the ashram, Ashvatthaman did not come

The Raja of Anga ate his fill of *apupa* and butter, and the others feasted on delicacies of the flesh of the *latvak*-bird Before pan was served, Prabhanjana brought wine made of matured honey Placing a goblet in each guest's hand, he kept refilling it with a long curved scoop-server Raja Duryodhana rose from his seat, lifted his goblet, and said "My friend the Raja of Anga with his world-conquest has brought unparalleled lustre to the Kaurava kingdom—a lustre that not even Grandfather Bhishma, Guru Drona, Acharya Kripa and Maharaja Pandu together could provide It is my hope that his glory continues to increase I propose that all of us drink a toast to celebrate the success of the world-conquest To the world-conquering Raja of Anga, Karna—"

"Victory to him! Victory to him!"

He made this announcement and quaffed the goblet in one gulp

All the assembled guests emptied their goblets, which Prabhanjana speedily replenished To ensure that the general enthusiasm did not flag, the two of us closed our eyes and swallowed deep gulps of the heady wine I managed to empty my goblet somehow and glanced in the direction of the goblet in the hand of the Raja of Anga Prabhanjana had refilled it We did imbibe moderately strong wine before a battle to rouse our spirits But this wine was

old hands, the white locks of his beard swayed We stepped over the threshold of this palace after six full months

On the stairs inside waited Radha-mata, Pita-ji, Vrishali-*bhabhi* and all the others They had embraced us with loving eyes long before we arrived at the palace We stood in front of them No one found any words to say A profound silence prevailed But this calm was all-expressive We were all blood-related No words were needed, yet everything was communicated and understood

While performing the *arati*, Vrishali's hands trembled so much that the lamps on the tributary platter clattered Bhaiya tried his utmost to control himself, but two involuntary tear drops fell on the lamps and fizzled to nothingness We offered obeisance to Pita ji The small stick in his hands shook He could not even utter the words of blessing With great difficulty he ran his hand on my head We stooped to take the dust of Radha-mata's feet Tear drops trickled from her face on to our heads We felt happy Truly, our world conquest was now fulfilled, purified

"Karna! Shatrunjaya!" Mother said tremblingly as she embraced us

"No, mother, call us Vasu and Shon " I reminded her of our real names

It was afternoon, and the sun was exactly above our heads Drenched in sweat as a result of the heat, Raja Duryodhana approached us Taking the Raja of Anga's hand in his, and climbing the stairs, he made enquiries about the world-conquering campaign One more step was left, he paused at the 105th step

"Raja of Anga, I have been so excited by your world-conquest that I have taken this opportunity to celebrate it by holding a banquet You, Shon, Ashvatthaman and others among us will feast tomorrow night You enjoy sweet pancakes and butter, don't you?"

He paused, then added "It is my desire that we perform the Rajasuya Yajna soon What do you think?"

"Yes, certainly But how did you discover that I relish pancakes and butter?"

"This surprises you, doesn't it? Raja of Anga, I can even tell the number of *anjalis* you offered when you stood in the waters of the Purushni that night after your frustration in the battle with Shalya My messengers and scouts roam the whole of Aryavarta Shall I tell you one more thing, Karna? It would have been more proper

exceptionally rich, so I whispered some advice to the Raja of Anga: "This stuff is not soma rasa. Go easy with it." He spilled it below his seat, but Prabhanjana again filled it to the brim. Bhaiya was helpless. I could not understand whether the guests had gathered to drink wine or to have dinner. The hundred princes, Shakuni and Jayadratha—all guzzled wine as if it were water. In no time at all the nature of the party changed completely.

Uncle Shakuni rose, reeling, and shook his clenched fist near his ear as if rattling a pair of dice. Approaching Bhaiya, he lisped, "Ka-a-r-na, I w-i-l-l conquer fif-ty con-quests l-i-k-e yours with the t-h-r-o-w of these d-i-c-e. Shpeak—what ish your shtake? Whash that? F-i-v-e? Shee, here's f-i-v-e!"

He had nothing in his fist, but pretended to throw the dice. "F-i-v-e!" he shouted even as he staggered. Trying to retrieve the non-existent dice, he collapsed with a thud.

I felt sorry for him.

In one corner Duhshasana was circling a stone pillar, imagining it to be a woman whom he was disrobing. "Shlave girrl! Shlave girrl!" he was mumbling, and guffawing uproariously.

In an instant the princes were also all mouthing nonsense. We had not drunk all the wine, yet our heads too were a little groggy. One was wailing like a baby, flailing his hands and feet wildly, another rolling on the floor. Had we been routed by a raja in our world-conquering campaign, I would not have felt the humiliation so deeply as I felt now, so grievously wounded was I by the rubbish these princes were mouthing.

Finally, Raja Duryodhana rose, blubbering, "Raja of Anga! Your world-conquest is useless. The Arjuna who humbled Siva in his hunter-shape is still alive. How are you going to defeat him? What is the point in offering the worship of *arghya*? Arjuna! Arjuna!" His mood was getting distorted. His body swayed like a clump of bamboo in a strong wind. The words that issued from his mouth sounded weird.

"Duryodhana!" Bhaiya shouted so loudly that the scoop-server slipped from Prabhanjana's grasp. The umbrage he showed now was many times more intense than the righteous irritation with which his eyes blazed forth when he made Shalya write the bark-note. The tip of his nose was flushed. Were his fire-shooting eyes rolling in indignation, or were the arteries on his head throbbing? I could not tell. His words were even swifter than his arrows. The

goblet in his hand was shaking violently. Quickly he stood up. Like the Deer Constellation raining furiously in the monsoon he spoke out: "You drunken so-called princes! Carry on drinking! If wine can make asses out of you Kshatriyas, then shame on wine and shame on wine-lovers like you! Shame on the wine that makes you forget that such valiant enemies as the Pandavas are still alive! I, Karna, Raja of Anga, vow here today that I will not touch a drop of wine until I have killed Arjuna, nor will I eat flesh. What's more, because I will wash my feet only with his blood, I refuse to wash my feet till that day. Duryodhana, you who call Arjuna invincible, if you do not find my world-conquest satisfactory, if you think my worship of the Sun is not sufficient, my merits not adequately shown, then from now on I will perfect my short-comings by offerings of charity. But remember, you who are cowed down by fear of Arjuna, I will certainly kill Arjuna." Bhaiya paused for a while, then thundered again: "From today, no supplicant will depart empty-handed from Karna's door, not till there is breath left in my body." He flung away the goblet, and stalked out of the room like a flaming feathered arrow.

My joy at the success of his world-conquest cooled at the men-tion of his fierce vow. Who knew what was in the offing? With this doubt in my mind, I followed him out. Like heaps of snapped fruits after a tree-shattering storm, the hundred Kaurava princes lay sprawled unconscious in the dining hall. Their trash was no more heard.

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Vaishakha was over; and the monsoons came. Rain poured in torrents on the city's ramparts, forts and pinnacles. News of Bhaiya's vow to donate to anyone who approached him spread throughout the city. From early morning suppliants gathered at his door. One wanted material to rain-proof his house from the down-pour; another a horse to replace one that had perished from an incurable water-borne disease; a third desired wealth; a fourth grains; a fifth cattle—many and varied were the appeals for help. After his morning ablutions and rites, Bhaiya would attend to the requests, and then only sit down to his meal. The presence of so many suppliants gave to the palace the atmosphere of a market-place. Even after the major part of the booty of the world-

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In one corner Duhshasana was circling a stone pillar, imagining it to be a woman whom he was disrobing "Shlave girrl! Shlave girrl!" he was mumbling, and guffawing uproariously.

In an instant the princes were also all mouthing nonsense We had not drunk all the wine, yet our heads too were a little groggy One was wailing like a baby, flailing his hands and feet wildly, another rolling on the floor Had we been routed by a raja in our world-conquering campaign, I would not have felt the humiliation so deeply as I felt now, so grievously wounded was I by the rubbish these princes were mouthing.

Finally, Raja Duryodhana rose, blubbering, "Raja of Anga! Your world-conquest is useless The Arjuna who humbled Siva in his hunter-shape is still alive How are you going to defeat him? What is the point in offering the worship of *arghya*? Arjuna! Arjuna!" His mood was getting distorted His body swayed like a clump of bamboo in a strong wind The words that issued from his mouth sounded weird

"Duryodhana!" Bhaiya shouted so loudly that the scoop-server slipped from Prabhanjana's grasp The umbrage he showed now was many times more intense than the righteous irritation with which his eyes blazed forth when he made Shalya write the bark-note The tip of his nose was flushed. Were his fire-shooting eyes rolling in indignation, or were the arteries on his head throbbing? I could not tell His words were even swifter than his arrows The

Shouting "May Karna, the Hero of Charities, live long!" the suppliants left; only two remained behind, both so old that they shivered in the heavy showers. One had a bluish complexion. I could not recall having seen anyone with a blue skin except Sri Krishna and Arjuna. Since he was a suppliant, I could not even ask him about it. The second suppliant had a round face, and he was staring fixedly at the feet of the Raja of Anga.

"I beg alms, O Hero of Charities, Karna!" the blue-skinned man quavered, shaking his staff.

"What do you desire, Baba? Wealth, grains, land, cattle, house?"

"These are useful only when one is in good health. I'm drenched to the bone and shivering to death. I need a bundle of faggots." The old man said this, his teeth chattering.

"Faggots?" The Raja of Anga, surprised, glanced first at Ashvatthaman, then at me. The old man's stick was shaking. Drops of water slipped down his white beard. If his request were not met, he would surely collapse, fatally.

"Shon, where are we going to find faggots for him at this time? Where can dry wood be found in this month of the heavy-raining Ardra Constellation?" The Raja of Anga worriedly looked at me. I had not forgotten the astonishing ideas he came up with during the world-conquering campaign. Who was I to advise him? If a way was to be found, it would come from him.

"Wait, Shon. Make him wait a little. He will certainly get what he wants." He emptied his fistful of pearls in the platter, and bounded up the stairs of his palace.

"Thud! Thud!" Strange sounds emanated from within his mansion and reverberated through the palace.

Soon he was back, coming down the stairs towards us, with a bundle of wood on his back. Only I knew that both the Karnas were the same—the Karna who, astride Vayujit, whirled his sword as General on the field of battle and the generous Donor Karna who descended the stairs with a bundle of wood on his back as a Nishadha tribal descends a mountain slope. Pulling out two horizontal sandalwood beams from the roof of the palace, he had chopped them into firewood pieces with his axe and, tying them up with the reins of Vayujit, brought them down the stairs on his shoulders. My mind was a welter of varied feelings. For a moment I thought that I did not deserve to be called his blood brother.

conquest had been placed in Duryodhana's possession, there were still many cartloads left over, which would not get exhausted even if all the suppliants of Aryavarta turned up By offering all that wealth in charity, he won over the minds and hearts of the people "The Hero of Charities, Karna"—he became the sole support of the needy, the weak, the physically handicapped, the exploited, the sorrowing, the Brahmin, the orphan, the disease-stricken

Karna, the Hero of Charities

He would seat himself on a stone dais in front of the palace. As I handed over to him the items that he called out, I was quite impressed by his conduct He began by greeting each petitioner with a gentle smile, a smile that was never shown to the soldiers of his army The wealth that he had painstakingly accumulated sojourning from one forest to another was now graciously distributed to thousands with a pleasant smile

I remembered vividly what Ashvatthaman had written in his letter—that the delight of experiencing the beauty of Nature is greater than the satisfaction of ten world-conquests While handing a zari-embroidered garment to an elderly lady, the Raja of Anga turned to Ashvatthaman who was standing next to me and asked, "Son of my Guru, tell me, which joy is greatest?—the joy of ten world-conquests, the joy of appreciating the manifold beauty of Nature, or the joy of wiping the tears from the eyes of an orphaned, hopeless, exploited, distressed and infirm person like this lady?"

Ashvatthaman had no answer All he did was smile

The sixth lunar mansion was uppermost, and the skies suddenly burst into rain, as if the clouds were declaring, "The joy of helping a distressed human is the greatest "

The downpour created a commotion among the crowd of supplicants The Raja of Anga dismissed his umbrella-bearer and personally handed out the goods in drenching rain It seemed to me that the ceaseless rains and overflowing-with-charity Vasu-bhaiya were competing

Gold, pearls, diamonds, cat's-eyes, and other gems were gifted away in fistfuls The chief advisor Vidura and Grandsire Bhishma watched the proceeding from the balcony of the palace—of which he was not even aware To ensure that the gift were received properly, Ashvatthaman helped each suppliant to spread open his garment Not one of us three realised that we were getting drenched to the skin

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"Here is what you wanted. I am sorry I kept you waiting so long," Bhaiya said with folded palms as he lowered the bundle and placed it at the feet of the blue-skinned suppliant.

"May you prosper, O Karna, Hero of Charities!" The old man raised his hand in a gesture of blessing.

I could not guess why the old man, while lifting the bundle, smilingly glanced at Grandsire Bhishma and Vidura sitting on the platform. As he was leaving, the other roundfaced elderly suppliant looked again at Bhaiya's feet. The two bent-backed old men left with the bundle. Near the front entrance of the main gate, the blue-skinned old man suddenly stopped and stood up straight. Seeing this, I wondered if it was Sri Krishna himself in disguise. And could the other old campanion be Yudhishthira by any chance?

The donation period for that day ended. The rain had ceased. But thoughts and feelings continued to flow in my mind. I had made a serious mistake by agreeing to be Bhaiya's charioteer. I could certainly drive Bhaiya's chariot, but I could not look after him. Had I been given the opportunity to look after him, I would have seen to it that I personally had the good fortune of applying sandalwood oil to his feet which must have tired after day-long standing at the service of the supplicants. Bhaiya would never have accepted if I had tried to do this as his younger brother.

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Like the spokes of the wheels of a speeding chariot, year followed year. "World-Conquering Karna"—this glory of Bhaiya was left behind, and "Karna, Hero of Charities" became the talk of the town. As a result, all the sons of the Hero of Charities became recipients of special respect and affection from the people. They had grown up and become like veritable peaks of the Himalayas. Like their father, they were expert in the martial arts. The eldest, Vrishasena, had also become a proficient wrestler. Vrishasena, Sushena, and Vrishaketa—the three sons of Vrishali-*bhabhi* possessed all the virtues of their parents. Chitrasena, Susharma, Prasena and Bhanusena—the four sons of Supriya-*bhabhi* were no less excellent in basic accomplishments. Before going to the gymnasium, all seven would wait to touch the feet of Bhaiya as he stood serving the suppliants, and only after completing the

veneration would they proceed. Seeing them, I was happy that Bhaiya's life had been so fulfilled. I had not studied life as profoundly as Ashvatthaman had. Nor had I tasted the brimming joys and sorrows of life as Bhaiya had. My life had been like the grass that grows on the fringes of a field of overflowing harvest. To a viewer from a distance, the grass is indistinguishable from the harvest. If my blood-relationship with the Raja of Anga were left out, what independent achievement had I of my own? I had become famous, as it were, by association with his glory That was why I always felt that my life is a story of simultaneous success and unsuccess.

We were fortunate to be born as Radha-mata's sons, surely because of the merits that we had accumulated in our past lives We had lived all our years hand in hand with open and trusting minds. A shard of a broken clay pot in a field in Prayaga had linked Vrishali-*bhabhi's* life with Bhaiya's. Later they had filled their life's pots to the brim with love; now the pots were overflowing.

The expert archer Karna who had been rejected by Guru Drona because of social prejudices had been accepted as a bosom-friend by the Guru's own son Ashvatthaman. Grandsire Bhishma had spurned Karna once; later he had welcomed Karna as the world-conquering hero. Seeing the clash of conflicting events, I thought: *Life is truly a great drama of simultaneous success and unsuccess.*

When I said as much to Bhaiya, he told me: "No, Shon. Life is not success and unsuccess. Birth is. Life's success or unsuccess depends on action."

Every thought, every idea of his was so perfect that there was no scope for argument. In fact, I could never make out why he often sought my approval.

"I give in charity, Shon. Everyone calls me Hero of Charities, but don't you find even my lavish alms-giving narrow and limited? Hastinapura and the four neighbouring kingdoms are my territory for alms-giving—not any others. We traversed the length and breadth of Aryavarta for our world-conquest—did we do the same when it came to charity? Tell me—what is the way out?" he asked me directly.

"If that's what you wish, there's only one way: marry off your seven sons, and marry them to girls from charioteers' families in distant lands. That will be the way to get suppliants from all lands

turning up here Those who are unable to come will receive wealth, grains, garments and more sent to them by us through our newly acquired kinsmen " I was eager to see all his sons married as quickly as possible, because they had reached marriageable age and were eminently eligible

"Very well You have the right idea Go with Satyasena and select the brides—preferably from such distant lands as Avanti, Kamarupa, Kamboja, Kashmira and others Satyasena should go west and north, you east and south Keep one thing in mind For Minakshi get a young man even more handsome and qualified than my sons She is a grown-up young lady now "

"Where will we find such an eligible good-looking young man?"

"What's the problem? If you can't do it, I'll find him myself That will at least provide me with an excuse to visit Mathura I'll go on the bridegroom quest myself "

He took upon himself the task of finding a husband for my daughter

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Satyasena and I travelled from kingdom to kingdom in search of suitable brides, while Bhaiya chose a husband for Minakshi in Mathura Invitations were sent to all places The new in-laws were respectfully requested to bring with them as many helpless and handicapped people as possible The auspicious day arrived, as foretold by the royal astrologers and *purohitas*

Moving through the length and breadth of the capital, Supriya and Vrishali bhabhi distributed rice and did the formal inviting They did not forget to visit Vidura's hut outside the city

From dawn the blare of drums filled the city The citizens had decorated their houses in celebration of the forthcoming weddings of the sons of their world-conquering Hero of Charities, Karna No raja dared to say, "These are weddings of the sons of a charioteer " The palace glittered like a bride in all her finery My tired parents, forgetting their physical exhaustion, were busily placing coconuts on top of the auspicious pitchers that were arranged around the altars of the magnificent pandals Life was all a joyful confusion Happiness poured on our heads copiously All the subjugated rajas of the world-conquest had arrived in Hastinapura, and those who for some reason were unable to be

present had despatched, as their representative, their chief minister, advisor, or general All of them, instead of crowding around the brides and bridegrooms for a glimpse, were gathered outside the pandal to see the Raja of Anga as he stood, distributing charity to Brahmins, rishis, ascetics, the helpless, and the poor

"Were I the lord of Hastinapura like Maharaja Dhritarashtra, I would order the name of the capital to be changed to Karnapura," were the words of Rukmin the Raja of Vidarbha, as he surveyed the scene

The weddings were solemnised The suppliants from various lands departed, chanting their blessing, "Victory to Karna!" The display of lamps organised that night made me wonder if heaven was up there, in the sky, or down here, on earth

The advice of Bhaiya as he blessed his daughters-in-law echoed in my ears "Though you enter a palace, never forget that you are daughters of charioteers " Those were his exact words Recalling them, I was transported, as it were Somewhere, in that corner of my mind where reproach rankled, stirred a memory of the Pandavas Ten years had elapsed since their forest exile In some forest, in some decrepit thatched hut, they must be sleeping, with night's darkness as their only blanket I felt very uneasy

I made the sight of seven daughters-in-law moving in the palace compensate for the grief I felt seeing Minakshi leave for her husband's house The rooms that had emptied as a result of the charities offered to the suppliants were now again filled with the wedding presents Bhaiya's charity-*yajna* continued as before, like the flow of the Ganga herself No one was sent away empty-handed, nor would anyone be sent away empty-handed later

At the time of leave-taking, Minakshi had left a message to be conveyed to her respected uncle, the Raja of Anga In the hustle and bustle of the wedding, it had slipped my mind The message was "I'll be back in no time to see your grandchildren playing with your flesh-ear-rings " I waited outside his palace door to see the smile light up his face as I said this But even after sunrise the door remained closed I must have knocked at least eight times—without any response Worry clouded my mind This had never happened before

"Bhaiya, open the door!" I said in alarm

"Is that Shon?" The bolt was unlatched The door opened His golden hair was dishevelled, and his usually calm face looked

disturbed With his hands clasped behind his back, he strode back and forth inside the room

"Why, what's the matter? You look so preoccupied " I asked because I could not control myself

"I can't make sense of anything, Shon "

"Regarding what?"

"I had a dream last night A weird one "

"What sort of dream? *Arre*, don't you know dreams are all unreal things?"

"No, Shon There's something in me that tells me this dream is going to come true In this dream I had an actual conversation with the god Surya "

"What did you talk about?"

"He told me that Indra himself will turn up at my door tomorrow as a suppliant He won't ask for wealth, property, garments, cattle and such things, instead, he will "

"Ask for what?"

"My skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings, Shon My skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings And to give to Arjuna!" His up-and-down pace increased

"No, Bhaiya, whatever the reason, you mustn't give in to this demand That won't be charity, that will be bondage " I almost screamed out my words I was trembling all over

"That is exactly the advice I was given by the god Surya He said repeatedly in no uncertain terms that if I ever gave away my armour and ear-rings I would be sealing my doom "

"And what did you reply?"

"Shon, you will not like what I said You will not be able to accept it "

"Tell me I'll die if I don't hear it right now "

"I did obeisance to the Sun-God, and replied that if the king of gods Indra personally appeared before my door as a suppliant, I would honour his greatness by offering him my skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings without question " His words poured like molten steel in my ears

"Why? Why do you want to gamble away your life in such a fearful way?"

"Shon you will not understand this now This offering of charity will be done only for the sake of glory "

"Fame! Fame! Haven't you had enough of fame by now? What

does fame amount to in the end? And what kind of fame are you after?"

"Karna, the Granter of Boons to the Killer of the anti gods Bala and Vritra, the Ruler of Heaven, the Lord of the gods Indra!—I want to ensure this glory for myself Shon, tomorrow Heaven itself will descend on this ancient earth and beg for alms For this glory I am prepared to go far beyond armour and ear-rings, I will offer life itself Heroes have very different views about life and death A man without fame is like a living corpse The doors of heaven open only to those with fame Good name is like a second mother—by keeping alive a man's memory and making him immortal, it gives him a fresh birth A man without fame is only a living corpse Running day and night after meals, sleep, wealth, love and the rest cannot be the meaning of life Life is measured by fame only You can see plenty of whales in the ocean whose life-span is hundreds of years Who calls them immortal? To merely exist is not to really live Only fame can tell you what life can be Every day thousands of beings take life on this earth—and perish Does anyone have time even to shed a few tears over them? The truly famed are those whose departure creates such a heart-rending void that it cracks the pillars of the minds of those left behind They are the ones who really lived—and who really died That is why I answered the Sun-God who asked me whether I wanted life or fame by saying, 'Fame' I cannot accept a life that continues if my good name is tarnished"

"Why then are you so upset by the chance you have of bestowing a gift of charity that will bring you immortal fame? Bhaiya, don't reject the truth that the desire to live is the most fundamental of all human instincts If one gets fame while alive, then the deep satisfaction of self-respect is also achieved But what's the benefit of a posthumous fame? A corpse has no way of appreciating the fragrance of flower-garlands heaped on it The real accomplishment is to carry on living in the world instead of chasing a theoretical fame That is what life is all about What else is the hope of that person too whom Indra plans to send to your door? He also wants to live! To remain alive is the deepest instinct of all creatures—and that is why you are so dejected today You want to live You know that you are unkillable on the battlefield because of your armour and ear-rings Even an expert archer like Arjuna cannot defeat you Bhaiya, see yourself honestly Dont' part with

your armour and ear-rings Try at least to remember that you have promised to kill Arjuna "

"Shon, enough! Things you never said when we were living together, you've spoken out now The waters of a lake do not know the fragrance of the pollen of full-blown lotuses, it's the distant bee who knows it That applies to you too I am surprised that even you have not understood my life-style and behaviour You've lived with me shoulder to shoulder—and yet you can say what you have said! Must you too think that I'm afraid for my life, I am upset by it, and that's why I'm confused? Shon, I am afraid, I am upset, I am confused—all this is true, but not because I fear for my life "

He was making mystery even more mysterious

"Shon, I'm uneasy because I am not sure from which part of my body, and how, I will slice off my invincible skin-armour and glittering flesh-ear-rings when the king of gods Indra asks for them How will any weapon cut my impenetrable skin? Will the pillar of fame that I have created for myself shatter because of the impenetrability of my skin and my ear-rings? This is the reason for my misgivings I've been worrying over this all night, and I can see no way out Tell me, Shon, from which part of my body and how should I slice my skin-armour?" Once again, he paced up and down with his hands behind his back

I lowered my head My thoughts seemed so trite and petty next to his sky-lucid ones We were both silent for a long time Finally, he left me and, taking with him a dry shawl, prepared for the *arghya*-offering

I informed Vrishali-*bhabhi* and the others and went from palace to palace alerting everyone They already knew what an inflexible mind he had None of us had the power to dislodge him from his decision to give away his armour and ear-rings

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After completing his daily ablutions and *arghya* offering, he came and stood on the platform from where he dispensed charity The queue of suppliants stretched into the far distance I looked to see if the king of gods Indra was in it, but could not spot him I breathed relief I kept passing into the hands of the Raja of Anga whatever offerings he indicated Gold, garments, pearls, grains,

oil and other commodities were generously distributed until all the petitioners were satisfied Father and mother, Vrishali-*bhabhi* and the seven sons, all standing pensive on the balcony, heaved sighs of relief and returned inside "It was only a dream, after all," I murmured and, picking up four pearls that had fallen on the ground, I replaced them in the platter In the meantime, an emaciated Brahmin entered from the main gate and paused there for a moment My mind throbbed with apprehension

"Who is it?" asked the Raja of Anga

"A poor Brahmin suppliant "

"Come here, friend, quickly The charity period is nearly over Please hurry "

Placing both hands on his hips, stooping, the Brahmin hobbled up to the platform Blinking, toothless, he stood there

"Learned Brahmin, what can I give you? Wealth, cattle, property, house, cereals, garments? Fruits, flowers, nectar? Male servants, maids, or bark-sheets for writing the scriptures? What? Order me "

"Karna, you are a Hero of Charity I have come, hearing of your fame, from a far land I desire no wealth, I am not one who hankers after wealth I desire no cattle, I am not a cow-herd I want no property, I am not a raja A house for me is wherever I happen to be, so I need no house Horses, cereals, fruits, flowers—I want none of these I am not a rishi who composes the scriptures, I don't need your bark-sheets "

"What then? Would you like to have me as a servant? What would you like me to do in carrying out your order? O celibate one, do not hesitate, just give the order It is possible for a cloud to depart waterless from an ocean, but no suppliant goes away empty-handed from Karna's door "

"This is just your false pride I don't want to contaminate your glory, so I shall leave, because I know you will never be able to give me what I want " The Brahmin turned towards the main gate The Raja of Anga stepped off the platform and, running towards him, touched his feet

"Please don't blacken my pure-white name in this way I am ready to cut off my head and place it at your feet if you so wish But I will not let you depart empty-handed Order me—what do you desire?"

"Karna, you who are honoured as the Hero of Charities! If you

are really so enamoured of your sky-rending reputation as the Hero of Charities, grant me the gift of your skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings " The Brahmin spread open his palms

Bhaiya stood up suddenly as if singed by fire His blue eyes filled with tears, his lips quivered

"Raja of the gods, Indra! You, here, at the doorstep of Karna, an ordinary son of an ordinary charioteer! And disguised as a decrepit Brahmin! Where am I? On this earth, or in heaven? Imagine—the king of gods who savours the amrita of heaven and sports with the *apsaras* standing with open palms at the doorstep of a mere mortal, a charioteer's son! Is this real, or am I dreaming? Shon, today today we have really completed our world-conquest There are four directions, and above them a fifth—and today we have conquered the fifth as well The Raja of the gods has come begging at the door of the Raja of Anga Approach, O lord of the gods—I welcome you, and place the gift of my armour and ear-rings in your begging bag But but come with a bigger bag, O great raja My body is unpiercable No weapon can slice it Therefore I shall place my body itself in your begging bag until life departs from me And when you return to heaven, lay this body out to dry on the golden outskirts of your kingdom My cooled blood will turn into vapour And you will get this golden skin-armour uncut, exactly as you want it "

The Raja of Anga paused, and added, "But what do you want all this for? Is there a shortage of gold in your heavenly treasury? Or has the golden lion on your throne worn out, and you need a replacement? Or is it that you envy the existence on earth of a skin-armour that equals your thunderbolt? Let me know, O Raja of the gods Surely you don't need my golden skin-armour as a footmat to spread on the steps of heaven by which you descended on earth today? Why are you silent? This is your second visit to earth, the first being during the reign of Maharaja Nahusha Maha-Indra, why are you speechless? Tell me at least the means by which I will be able to place this skin-armour at your feet Because because I doubt if there is any place in heaven for a charioteer's son like me I presume you want only my skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings, isn't that so? But how can I part with them—they have been with me indissolubly from birth How do I separate them? I'm creasing my forehead to find out a way, but I see no possibility I stand before you ashamed, because I realise that my reputation is at stake "

"No, Karna, your fame will not be tarnished Draw the sword from your hip scabbard, and slide its sharp edge along your lotus-soft mouth A layer of your skin-armour will come off in your hand Holding it, peel off the rest of your armour exactly as one peels bark off a tree Karna, you, and you only, can conquer all the five directions "

"Raja of the gods, how will I ever be able to repay this obligation? The idea never occurred to me You are extraordinary ' His eyes shone with a strange joy

Walking swiftly, he came to the appropriate spot on the platform He whipped the sword out from its sheath—the swish of the weapon sent a shiver up my spine I held the sword back, and said to him agitatedly, "No, no, Bhaiya Your flesh-ear-rings today have again become lustreless "

"Shon, from today they will be forever lustreless But today I have no fears on that account Today heaven itself will become lustreless compared to them Move out of my way ' His sword flashed naked I beat my head against his feet repeatedly and screamed, "Bhaiya, grant me alms today too! Don't slice your skin-armour " My head was whirling

He was oblivious to all Uncle Shakuni was not so obsessed when throwing dice as Bhaiya was now Nor was drunk Duryodhana so intoxicated at the banquet as Raja Karna now

Eyes closed, chanting the hymn to the Sun-god Surya, he quickly slid the sharp blade across his open mouth A couple of drops of blood spurted on Raja Indra's waist-cloth

"Bhaiyaaaa! Bhaiyaaaa!" I screamed in anguish I had not shouted in such pain even in childhood when I ran after his chariot Then he heard my agonised wail, now he did not He peeled the armour from his body like bark peeled off a tree Like the reddish flesh of a newly cut fig exposed, the flesh of his body was revealed piece by piece Like a mound drenched by the waters of the Ganga, his body was drenched by warm blood

My body felt as if countless arrows were piercing it The platform swirled in front of my eyes I felt giddy I clutched my head and, hiding it between my knees, sat down It was time now for all to sit down

Divesting himself of his skin-armour as one removes a garment he smilingly handed it to the lord of heaven The next instant he had sliced off his ear-rings and placed them on top of the armour

He was smiling gently What great joy could he possibly have been feeling? Heaping embers on our hopes and desires, he had strewn flowers at the feet of Indra What satisfaction had he received?—I raised my head and looked at his face for an answer Even death could not have been so horrific As a result of the total stripping of his skin-armour, the blood-smeared exposed flesh and the sliced ear-lobes made him look so disfigured that I was stupefied He stood on the platform like a tree half-devoured by fire I rose unsteadily Was I alive or dead? I could not be sure He was no more the great bow-expert, the world-conquering general, and the Hero-of-Charities Karna—he was nothing He was just a distorted, ugly-looking dummy Glancing at me, he smiled as he always did, but I did not find the smile to be the same as before His golden, shining teeth looked fearful through his blood dripping mouth Shorn of the lovely golden hair, along with the skin-armour, his head had the appearance of a round mace-top And the lower half of his sliced ears no longer glittered with golden gleams, instead, there were two dripping blobs of blood, just blobs of blood

"Vasu-u-u-u!!!" Seeing him in that mutilated state, Radha-mata screamed, fell in a faint, and rolled down the stairs, hitting the landing with a thud Even in that disfigured condition, he rushed forward to help her but, noticing that his spurting hot blood was creating blisters on her body, he stepped back I could not make out whether I should laugh at the fact that such a blood-drenched body could have such a noble mind, or whether I should bemoan the course of destiny that made such things possible Even Indra's hands were burnt by the skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings, but Indra's anxious and restive mind was calmed Was it because he had ensured the safety of his son Arjuna, or was it because he had received the darshan of an unparalleled Hero of Charities? There was no way of knowing Coming down the stairs of the palace, Vrishali and Supriya-*bhabhi* ran towards the Hero of Charities, but they also were unable to touch him They wept their hearts out from a distance, wailing, "Lord! Maharaja!" My head felt numb All the balconies of the palace were crowded with people, weeping as they saw the transformation of a handsome world-conquering hero into a twisted, ugly puppet But Bhaiya stood still on the platform His thick blood had coagulated on the very spot where the tears of grateful suppliants has fallen Exclaiming "Hai! Hai!"

they expressed their sorrow I covered my ears with my palms My ears were not used to hearing anything other than victory cries in his honour I was unable to bear the pity showered now on his deformity

Stepping down the platform, he slowly approached the lord of the gods, touched his feet, and said, "Raja of the gods, I have no desire to live by giving pain to anyone The hearts of all present here are breaking for my sake If it's possible, please restore my good looks, if not, use this sword to make an end of me It will be no problem at all now to sever my head from my trunk " He placed his sword at Indra's feet, and lowered his head His always glowing-like-gold back now had a molten steel glaze

"Rise! You are a very exceptional person, Raja of Anga, Karna I am pleased with you, and I give you an infallible weapon—the Vaijayanti missile " The Raja of the gods raised him up and caressed his entire body Slowly his frame appeared to heal The blood evaporated like mist The flesh-armour was gone, and in its place appeared skin

"May you prosper, Hero-of-Charities Karna!" With this blessing, the lord of the gods Indra, disguised as a Brahmin, went out by the main gate, taking with him the armour and ear-rings and leaving behind his defeat on the platform

Forgetting the fact that he had given away armour, many hurried forward and embraced the Raja of Anga Someone announced, "Hero-of-Charities Karna! May you live a hundred autumns!" I did not hear the announcement I stared, unblinking, to my heart's content at the dried drops of blood Flowers rained from the palace balconies No one had the time to find out if they fell from heaven or some other place The populace had lovingly crowded around the Raja of Anga It was impossible to know what he was feeling He stepped forward and offered reverence to Radha-mata

"Vasu-u-u-u-u!" Radha-mata's voice was choked

"Not Vasu, Vaikartana, mother," he said, gently

Radha-mata ran her fingers on the lower half of his severed ears Hers was an utterly intense mother-love Supporting her, he calmly climbed the steps of the staircase of the palace His sons, daughters-in-law, trusted ones, me—he was oblivious to all The fascinated observers, on both sides, feelingly rained flowers on mother and son But the Sun-god Surya did not wish to see

Karna's stripped body, so he had set earlier than usual on the western horizon. Thick darkness descended on all sides.

What had Bhaiya gained by giving away his skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings? He had obtained Indra's infallible Vaijayanti missile, capable of annihilating any one heroic warrior. And universal, undying, celestial fame.

BOOK 8

KARNA

1

"You have destroyed all my hopes and desires Why did you have to give away your skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings? You have certainly attained fame in the three worlds as a splendid granter of charities, but remember, Raja of Anga, that as a result the other kings are now more powerful than you Without his armour and ear-rings, Karna is like a snake without fangs, a lion without his mane, and the Himalayas without peaks How will you now be able to face Arjuna on the battle-field?"

Raja Duryodhana was heartbroken at the sight of my decimated ears He paced in front of me like a wounded tiger

"How did you ever get the impression that my strength lay only in my armour and ear-rings? King, even without them I can destroy Arjuna " I tried to console him every way I could, but in my mind too a nagging, harsh voice stressed my helplessness A warrior without strength—an elephant without tusks . My skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings were my main strength I renounced them in order to reach the difficult pinnacle of prestige

"Guard your armour and ear-rings!" What answer could I give to Grandsire Bhishma? I was not afraid of any consequences, in fact, I was even a little proud of my deed It was impossible to convey this logically in words to Duryodhana No matter how excellent a language is, it is never able to express everything one has in one's mind Duryodhana's politically-oriented mind would never be able to understand human emotions He kept circling the room in agitation

"There is a way, Karna There is only one way left now for you to become all-powerful again " He said this quickly, raising his thick eyebrows

"And what is that?" I asked in surprise

"Acquire the Brahma-weapon "

"Who has that weapon? Tell me, king I will move sky and underworld for it "

"Karna, it is my desire that you obtain this Brahma-weapon for all of us Whether you get it, or I—it's the same I think you are the only archer deserving of such a weapon Only a powerful elephant deserves pure-white, strong tusks "

"If you feel so strongly about the fact that I do not possess the Brahma-weapon, I will make it a point of obtaining it at any cost Just let me know how you plan to help me "

"You will have to approach Guru Drona In Hastinapura only Drona knows the secret of the Brahma-weapon The supreme son of Brahma, Bhagavan Parashurama personally taught him the use of this weapon, so Guru Drona is your only recourse "

"King, what is this that you are saying? Must I in desperate helplessness go to the person who has heaped smouldering insults on my head in front of lakhs and lakhs of people? Must I stand with bowed head before a man who doesn't have a single word of affection for Karna? Must I go as a beggar at the doorstep of Drona-ji—I who made Indra himself come supplicating to my door as a beggar? Do you realise what you are saying?"

"Yes, Karna, life is like the wheel of a potter Kala, the Spirit of Time, disguised as a potter, spins the wheel as he wishes There is no place in it for anyone's personal likes or dislikes That is why the potter Kala makes pots of any design he likes There are times in one's life when one has to forget insults and perform one's duty. If you refuse today "

"So?"

"So it will be considered as a defeat in the career of Duryodhana I have given word on your behalf without consulting you, to Uncle Shakuni "

"What did you promise him?"

"For my sake, Karna will learn the secret of the Brahma-weapon from Guru Drona If Karna doesn't learn it, I will But that will happen only after the friendship of Karna and Duryodhana is broken "

"King, is this how you are testing me? For the sake of your affection, I am prepared to reject even the three worlds But how can I go to the doorstep of Guru Drona and stand there as a beggar? Karna is ready to embrace death, but he will not compromise his self-respect and his freedom What a weird predicament you've put me in! I don't know what to do "

"No If you are so upset by the thought of going to Drona, I

won't press you But remember, Raja-of-Anga Karna, Duryo dhana is a wonderful friend, but he can also be a bitter enemy From today the Raja-of-Anga Karna will be only one of the respectworthy Rajas of Aryavarta, not a friend I will see you later "

"Wait, king I am ready to go What I would not have done for myself under any condition, I will do for you I will go as a pupil at the door of the very same Drona who always sought to drown me in the ocean of his indifference For your sake only Summon the royal astrologers today for the sake of our friendship and find an auspicious *muhurta* for the journey An auspicious hour is proper for the quest of the Brahma-missile "

"Well spoken, Karna!" He took my hand in his and pressed it joyfully That grip of his demonstrated the intensity of his affection for me His eyes shone with happiness He kept staring intently at me I had never before seen such gratitude in his eyes

In the innermost cave of my mind the words "Brahma-missile! Brahma-missile!" danced topsy-turvy in circular abandon I had heard from Ashvatthaman that the Brahma-missile was a horrendous mankind-annihilating weapon My mind was trapped in a welter of conflicting thoughts Why was this Brahma-weapon created? It was not only destructive of human life, it was capable of wiping out existence itself on the earth Hundreds of thousands of years must have gone into the creation of this enchanting earth, but this missile could obliterate all that creation in an instant Nature had endowed man with intelligence superior to that of other creatures in order to enable him to live happily or was it given him to destroy himself? Should one even try to obtain such a weapon? If the question were put to me, I would have replied with a straight no, because my basic instinct was pacifist My way of thinking was simple live with dignity yourself, and let others live with dignity too When the time came, I was ready to accept my death, but it was not possible for me to agree to live comfortably myself at the expense of others My philosophy was harmonious coexistence But

But the question of what I wished or not did not arise at all The weapon was in Arjuna's hands, in the hands of an adversary who was forever my tormentor If I did not obtain it how could I then overpower my adversary? All the problems of life cannot be solved by standing on the glossy grounds of abstract truth Some-

times it is necessary to stand on the harsh stone of practical considerations There was only one sure way left for me now—and that was to get hold of the Brahma-missile Whether I liked it or not, I was constrained by circumstances to do so Kala the Spirit of Time had willed it so Kala is a cruel tiger he hunts and runs off with the idealistic dreams of mankind in his jaws as if they were a deer What would be achieved by obtaining this Brahma-missile? What really is the point of all these annihilating weapons? Who was there to answer these questions? We are all victims of Time Who would benefit from this missile? When all is consumed in a holocaust, who is left to be happy? Who finds peace?

My mind was in a complete quandary Had I blundered by agreeing to Duryodhana's desire? I asked myself this question thousands of times, but received no satisfactory answer I felt a deep need for Ashvatthaman An indescribable feeling of having found a solution came over me whenever I listened to his nectar-like words In acute mental dilemma, his simple, wise truths consoled and inspired me It may be right to say that a man lives by his feelings, but he does not do so only by them Wise truths provide a path which he has to accept at the right time Wasn't my decision to obtain the Brahma-missile part of an acceptance of wise truth? Practical convenience or wise truth? It wasn't clear to me at all I removed the crown from my head, and took off my royal vesture Putting on a simple garment, my shawl over my shoulder, I started walking towards the military academy in order to meet Ashvatthaman I was not dressed as a raja, and I had not ordered a chariot yoked The maids and men-servants stared at me in surprise

So lost was I in my thoughts that I had no idea when I reached the military academy In the neatly laid out grounds inside were a couple of thatched-leaf huts, in which lived Ashvatthaman, Guru Drona, and some young religious aspirants I did go off and on to Ashvatthaman's hut, but only on specific business And he always received me with a smile His nature, fragrant as a champak, produced joy all around him Guru Drona lived alone, by himself, in a thatched-leaf hut situated mid-way, next to Ashvatthaman's

As always, I stood in front of the hut Seeing that inspiring sight, my ignoble thoughts relating to the Brahma-missile scattered like clouds dispersed by a strong wind Ashvatthaman who discoursed always on complex matters like life, salvation and the atman, who

always appeared to me to be as impressive and grand as the sky was lisping like a little boy to a calf born hardly a week ago and seemed to have forgotten even himself He was brushing the bushy tail of the calf against his smooth cheeks Seeing me he said seriously to the animal, "Guess who s here son of a bull! He is the finest archer of Hastinapura, who gave away as charity his skin armour and flesh ear-rings to the king of the gods Indra himself in order to keep his word He is the beloved pupil of the sun god Surya He welcomes every guest who turns up at his door So it is fit that you welcome him too But, bhai a dry welcome will not do You will have to give him half your share of bubbling hot milk Are you ready to do so? ' He said this into the calf's ears

The calf fixed his large berry like eyes on me and pricked his ears His pretty tufted tail jerked up and he mooed Humm aa! ' loudly, as if he had followed every word of Ashvatthaman He seemed to agree to the request His mooing pleased Ashvatthaman enormously Ashvatthaman tickled the calf's hairy forelock I gazed at them, fascinated They seemed to me to be twin attractive manifestations of the spirit of life itself It briefly occurred to me that had I been a young rishi my life also would have been like this—like Ashvatthaman's

Sitting on a deerskin in his thatched hut, we chatted variously Casually I referred to the Brahma missile Immediately he grew serious and said, "Karna, life is not a black and-white piece of printed cloth It has quite a few shades of grey in it ' I couldn't catch the full import of what he said, but I curbed my curiosity He brought some milk for me, after drinking it, I asked his permission to leave Pure white moonlight drenched the outdoors As I made my way to the palace, it occurred to me that life could not be a cloth with black and white stripes, there must be times when shades of grey fall on it But the border of the cloth had to be colourful, because in that pure, cool moonlight all moving and unmoving life seemed awash with a dazzling sheen The earth like a little boy seemed to be taking quick dips in an ocean of moonlight

Soaking in the joy of the moon, I walked with slow steps to the palace The guard, failing to recognise me, stopped me "Who s there?"

I raised my head and looked at him The mutilated lower remains of my ears throbbed Seeing them, he recognised me

Forestalling me, he fell at my feet and said abjectly, "Forgive me, Maharaja I was unable to recognise you in this dress "

Without replying, I held him by his arms and made him rise, and handed him the lance that lay on the ground next to him Giving him an encouraging pat on his back, I entered the main gate It occurred to me again that life is not a cloth of black and white stripes, there are times when shades of grey fall on it, and it does have a colourful border, and stray threads do occasionally straggle out—like that slightly crazy guard

Next morning I learnt from Shon that Raja Duryodhana had consulted the royal astrologers and had been advised about the most auspicious day to approach Drona in order to obtain the Brahma-missile Luckily it fell on a Sunday I was expected to go to him at the cowdust hour of twilight In all probability I would now have to pass my days with Guru Drona in the military academy During my absence Raja Duryodhana had arranged to personally look after the affairs of the kingdom of Anga Besides Shon and Raja Duryodhana, no one was in the know of this plan of ours

2

Sunday arrived From crack of dawn I stood in the waters of the Ganga From morning till the afternoon, I faced eastwards, then I looked to the west As the sun dipped in the west, I quietly closed my eyes In front of my shut eyes lay the vast ocean of sun-rays—radiance and yet more radiance on all sides, dazzling light and total silence Only two things about this limitless earth seemed to me to be true—one was the Sun God flooding with light the moving and unmoving life of the world from primeval times, and the other was the fact of the earth whose every single atom delighted in the solar dazzle The ancient earth bedecked in multifarious dresses The Sun-God Surya and the Earth The Earth and Surya What place did I have between them? Was I just a shining ray linking both, or a mere speck of dust on the earth? My mind whirled with these thoughts, trying to find a meaning to life

Sensing that the radiance in front of me was slowly dimming, I opened my eyes On the western horizon, beyond the distant peaks, I saw the outline of an axe In one corner, in wet sand, stood Duryodhana, waiting for me God alone knew when he had

come there and how long he had been waiting In his hands was a *thali* full of fruits and a large bowl of milk Seeing him I felt a wave of friendship well up in me Would anyone believe it possible that the man with the *thali* of fruits was the Crown Prince of Hastinapura himself, and that he was actually waiting for me? How alert and eager he looked! He had seen to it that not even an attendant was present, so that our plan of obtaining the Brahma-missile would remain totally secret Who was there to witness his pure affection? Only the Ganga

Emerging from the water, I noticed that the dry cloth I had placed at the river bank had been swept away by a stray breeze Placing the *thali* in my hands, Duryodhana said, "Karna, finish the fruits first, then the milk You have not had even a bite since morning "

I accepted the *thali* from him As a friend, he seemed to me like a sturdy banyan A Kaurava hero had waited for hours, *thali* in hand, on the desolate bank of the Ganga to honour an ordinary son of a charioteer Those who belittled Duryodhana were utterly stupid—the truth was that he was a close friend and a hero I ate some of the fruits and drank the milk In the meantime, Duryo dhana brought me the cloth I had left on the far bank Instantly I was reminded of Shon

I changed my wet clothes Duryodhana placed his shawl on my shoulders I could not control myself, I said, "King, it is time for you to go back I will certainly procure the Brahma missile Trust me Karna has given his word "

I glanced at him once His thick eyebrows moved swiftly up and down A sliver of the setting sunlight fell across his face, and lit up his blood-red complexion with a strange joy He held me firmly by my shoulders and, shaking them briefly, he left, without saying a word His vibrant eyes were saying clearly to me, 'Go My best wishes are with you " He turned, and strode away in the direction of the palace, pressing his heels deep in the sand as he walked

His tall, huge frame slowly dwindled as he stepped towards the palace I could see the distinct trail of his feet on the wet sand I said to myself softly *Duryodhana, Karna always accomplishes what he takes up Have no fear* I moved in the direction of Guru Drona's thatched hut with a thoughtful and serene mind In the sky single *karandava* birds or pairs shrilled and fluttered down to nests in small-sized trees Evening twilight had descended on all

four quarters I kept walking towards Guru Drona's thatched hut in the military academy The road had many twists and turns Life also is a footpath of such twists and turns—or so I felt Today's special turn had an extraordinary significance in my life For the sake of Duryodhana I had decided to go to Acharya Drona as a disciple It's absolutely true that no one can predict who will meet who at what turn in life—and what will emerge from such meeting is an even more difficult task Who had even thought, four days ago, that Indra would meet us and he would ask for the skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings as alms? Yet that is exactly what happened And that was the starting-point for my being here in front of Guru Drona's thatched hut

Lost in thoughts, I arrived at Guru Drona's hut The calm of twilight pervaded everywhere Crickets chirped in the chinks of the turrets of the military academy A few straggly birds were returning to their nests There was total silence in the thatched hut In a corner of the hut was a fire pit, and sparks from it were visible through the thin walls I waited outside for some time I distinctly recalled the day of the tournament That life-hurting insult rankled in some part of my mind, and now it began slowly to surface, second by second A man may forget his moments of joy and peace, but his sorrows and, specially, his insults he cannot forget even if he tries very hard to do so An insulted mind means unending torment Was I really going to the same Guru Drona who, perhaps indeliberately, had systematically humiliated me in front of the entire populace of Hastinapura? How could I swallow my pride and put on a false smile? *Chhee*, what else is life if not a couldn't-care less boy? A boy who plays when he wants with the toy he has, and flings it aside when he so wishes Exactly the way life plays with a person, throwing him away wherever it so wishes Is there anyone in this world who has his life-strings completely in his hands? It just is not possible Man is dependent, but one cannot know for certain on whom One thing is sure—he is certainly dependent on someone Who knows who twirls this man-shaped doll? Neither is it possible to know why this ceaseless activity goes on Is this what is known as life? It must be, but then why is man so obsessed with the desire to live? Have I come under the spell of this obsession to survive and so arrived at Guru Drona's door? Ah! I have not come for myself I had to fulfil the wish of my closest friend It must be a very strange person indeed who lives only for

himself I was happily going to sacrifice my pride in order to give happiness to someone There are times when insult has to be shelved If that is not possible, it has to be temporarily swallowed

My mind made up, I pushed open the door of the thatched hut with my left hand and set foot inside This was the first time I had entered the thatched hut

Guru Drona was sitting serenely in the lotus posture on a tiger-skin Hearing my footsteps and the creak of the door, he slowly opened his eyes I stepped forward quickly and did obeisance No matter what, he was going to be my Guru

"Who is it?" he asked, raising his neck, because the light from the clay lamp on the floor was insufficient to reveal my face

"I am Karna," I replied, my hands folded, my head bowed There was intense anguish within me—an anguish of circumstance-created helplessness that life had confronted me with

"Karna? At this strange hour?"

"I am eager to learn the secret of the Brahma-missile I wish to be your disciple in order to do so "

'The Brahma-missile? This secret is for Kshatriyas only Or don't you know?" The sparks in the fire-pit facing him crackled

"I am now a Kshatriya I am the crowned Raja of Anga I have a world-conquest to my credit Gurudeva, I have given away as alms my skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings to Indra "

"You are not a Kshatriya What gives you the right to call yourself a Kshatriya just because you happen to be the Raja of Anga? An ass doesn't become a tiger by strutting about in tiger-skin "

"All the citizens accept me now as a Kshatriya They bow to me because I am a world conqueror I am respected as a Hero of Charities "

"They don't think much of you. They respect only the royal power of Duryodhana You may be Kshatriya in Duryodhana's eyes But in the eyes of the world, you are just the son of a charioteer—a low person, a trivial person A dog whose beat is a village should not try to be the equal of the king of the jungle You can go "

Every single word of his stabbed me like a spear My mind agonised as if beaten by a thorny stick Who is the lion and who the dog? What is the test? Birth, that s all Birth How many people are these flaunters of high family flags going to trample

under their feet? My veins throbbed and glowed But, controlling myself, I said, "I am the son of a charioteer Is that my fault? Can anyone decide which family to be born in? I will always sit at your feet For the sake of the Brahma-missile, I will do whatever feat you order me to I will serve you as a disciple should "

"You are the son of a charioteer To give you the Brahma-missile is like placing a flaming torch in the hands of a monkey " He closed his eyes again

His arrogant, cruel words splintered my heart I would not have felt such unbearable anguish, such torture even if someone had decapitated me with a stroke of a sword Patience must indeed be a noble virtue, but is not helpless silence an ignoble quality? The veins on my inflamed head swelled Fire pits flamed out of my eyes Gathering all my energies, I shouted wildly, "Guru Drona, who are you saying all this to? I am a charioteer's son Is that all you want to proclaim again and again? Then I will also from today scream to the world, 'I am a charioteer's son I am a charioteer's son Birth is an accident of destiny But effort is in my hands—in my hands ' I have no need of your Brahma-missile Should I ever need it, I will obtain it as the son of a charioteer, without your help, on my own "

Kicking open the door of the thatched hut, I emerged in the open, sick at heart Ashvatthaman was standing outside, from I don't know when He must have overheard our heart-rending exchange He spread out both arms to stop me I jerked them aside Now now I was in no mood to listen to the wise remarks of anyone

"Karna, wait! Wait, Karna!" he shouted in a hurt tone Only the sound penetrated my ears, not his meaning Insult! Insult! Insult! My mind was full of indignation Was my life only fit for insults? Karna, "son of a charioteer, son of a charioteer"—by branding you in this way, was the world going to destroy your life itself? Did you take birth merely to be the butt of "charioteer's son, charioteer's son"? Ah! If I indeed am a charioteer's son, why do these words pierce me like arrows in my heart? I had endured insult once How did the world evaluate that? Does the world have the impression that I can be branded anything any time it wishes? What indeed does the world think me as? He's low He's despicable He has not a shred of self-respect He has no standing of his own That's what they all think of me, do they? Countless chariot-

questions criss-crossed my mind The blood in my body boiled With the arrows still in my heart, numbed, I hurried to the palace like a black stag Darkness all around A darkness that devoured all faith and hope A darkness of doom, the remnant of a radiance-consuming end-of-the-world blackness The darkness of doom that took the black needles of Kala in its fingers and stitched blackness with black threads on a black cloth My heart was filled with insult All around me was pitch dark Darkness and insult Insult and darkness I felt suffocated The crickets, assistants to the black Emperor of night, shrilled with all their energy Black, horrnedous creatures Filthy insects They also were needling me with cries of "Son of a charioteer! Son of a a charioteer!" Had the world really turned upside down today? Had everyone decided to taunt Karna? When does insult end? It ends the moment it is endured The man who once endures insult for any reason succeeds in laying the groundwork of his own living death No matter how many mountains of achievement he climbs, in the eyes of the world his rating remains zero The world looks at him with indifferent and supercilious eyes Ah! Where could I go? What should I do? Who could I unburden this heart-burning pain to? Insult! Insult! Insult! Insult at every step! How could I have endured it till now? Was I really alive—or had I indeed become a ghost? From all four sides demeaning words and thoughts rained on my head My soul was grieving My head was numb No way out seemed possible I could see nothing in front of me I had no desire to look back either I was like a man in flaming clothes running blindly ahead My mind was on fire My birth was making me helpless—I was the son of a charioteer Why was I born a charioteer's son? Better—better I had not been born at all *Arre*, what kind of life was this blackened with condemnation? If the Creator had not thrown the dice, wouldn't life and history all have remained blank? Why did I have to take birth in a charioteer's home? Very well, I did take birth so Then why am I attracted to the military weapons instead of being interested in equestrian matters? Why was I made the Raja of Anga? And why did I have to come to Hastinapura of all places? *Arre*, is this a city for heroes? Is this a city that dispenses and cherishes justice? What now could I expect from an elderly bull like Guru Drona? What wisdom can the decrepit mind of a man—a man who has been battered by Kala the Spirit of Time itself—give to the world? From my boiling mind erupted all these

flaming thoughts I crunched the pebbles underfoot and continued to stride to the palace I was no world-conqueror, not even an all-respected warrior I was only a son of a charioteer, just that and no more, I was like the dust under the wheels of a chariot

The Ashvatthaman who had so sweetly compared life to a celestial fruit now appeared to me to be no better than a fool How can life ever be a divine fruit? Also, as I always used to tell him, it isn't a battlefield either, because on a field of battle the only prized quality is merit Crazy Ashvatthaman! As you say, life is certainly not like a dewdrop, it's a forest fire which can be sparked off by anyone at any time, which reduces to ashes someone or other, and which sooner or later extinguishes by itself It's that forest-fire which is burning me today Just because my body does not have skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings any more, does that mean it will become ashes? No, it cannot be I refuse to be ashed, I refuse to be annihilated I *will* obtain the Brahma-missile

Like agitated thrushes pecking at a snake, a cyclone of feelings and thoughts assaulted me Such was my agitation when I reached the palace gate Duryodhana was there, waiting for me Seeing him, I felt numb What was I going to report to him? He stopped me and asked impatiently, "What happened, Karna? Back so soon?

"King, an Aryan lady never utters the fact of her own widowhood A soldier never confesses his own humiliation Please let me pass " I jerked his hand away I had no feelings for anyone today Like a piece of dry straw in the eye of a whirlpool, my mind kept swirling endlessly around one idea Son of a charioteer! Insult! Effort the test of merit?

"Insult! Karna, who insulted a brave world-conquering warrior like you, and why?" He held me tightly by my arm and shook me as he said this, his eyebrows lifted sharply

"The most respectworthy Guru of the Kauravas Acharya Drona himself How and why don't ask me I feel suffocated by the bitter truths of life Please leave me to myself for a while " I released myself from his gripping fingers

"I can sense your bitterness But what good will sulking do? Acharya Drona has insulted you over the Brahma-missile, and you will have to revenge the insult by obtaining the Brahma-missile Keep in mind, Karna will be Karna only when that happens " He said this, taking my hand in his

"I am certainly going to get the missile. I will go personally to Bhagavan Parashurama on Mahendra mountain for it, but don't stop me now even for an instant. I don't have words to describe my mental anguish. Let me go." I pulled my hand free and ran up the palace stairs, my shawl slipping from my shoulder and falling on the steps as I did so. I did not have the desire even to pick it up. My inflamed soles felt the cold stairs acutely, and were temporarily soothed by their cool touch. But my flaming mind—ah! not flaming, but thudding—how would that be calmed? Who would console that?

I entered my room and closed the door. I wanted total aloneness. Only aloneness could calm me. But would it really bring me peace? In fact, the health of an insulted mind is totally shattered by aloneness. Every second the sticks of meaningless thoughts beat on the drum of my agitated mind, and further discombobulated me. Only one conclusion was definitely arrived at from this welter of thoughts and feelings—the Brahma-missile! the Mahendra mountain! Bhagavan Parashurama! The Brahma-missile! Karna, the successful obtainer of the Brahma missile! Karna full of shakti! Son of a charioteer, yes, but a successful son of a charioteer called Karna! Parashurama's disciple Karna!

3

The next day, I left Hastinapura without telling anyone except Shon; as I galloped away on Vayujit, the only thought in my mind revolved around Parashurama. What kind of a man was he? From what others had told me, he seemed to be a frightening person. A Kshatriya-hater, quick-tempered, obstinate—these were the usual descriptions. Sri Krishna had killed his maternal uncle because he was an oppressor. But Parashurama had killed his own mother Renuka simply because his father had so wished it. He was the Guru in archery of Grandsire Bhishma, and in order to wipe out the hundred sons of Kartavirya he had on twentyone occasions easily vanquished the Haihaya rajas. In the end, after all these feats, he flung the conquered kingdom at the feet of his Guru, rishi Kashyapa, as if it were a mere drumstick and himself retired to the Mahendra mountain. I was going to a superman whose very name sent shudders up all spines. My mind tried to reconstruct him imaginatively, but no clear outline emerged. My horse galloped in the direction of Mahendra.

I took no companion with me because the roads I was travelling on had already been covered by me during the world-conquering campaign The territory to be traversed included the kingdoms of Panchala, Kashi, Eastern Dasharna, and some others I had no desire to halt in any of their capitals I had made up my mind that I would rest briefly in convenient temples and proceed as quickly as possible to the Mahendra mountain The fact that the Mahendra mountain happened to be in the kingdom of Kalinga made the problem a little knotty for me All the citizens there, including Raja Bhanumat, knew me well and could recognise me So I decided to enter their kingdom under cover of night It was not possible for me to climb up the Mahendra mountain without leaving Vayujit in the hands of someone I could trust

Planning my journey in this manner, I reached Panchala I wanted to visit Sudamana's samadhi on the bank of the Ganga near the city of Kampilya But what if I was spotted there? The news would travel to Raja Drupada, and further travel for me would stop I had no time for his welcome and hospitality I was in a hurry to reach the Mahendra mountain, I was bent on obtaining the Brahma missile So I would slip into and out of Panchala unnoticed I noticed that some Panchala citizens were gazing curiously at me But seeing my lobe less ears, they shook their heads mystified I had anticipated that my royal robes would attract attention and had exchanged them with an ascetic's garb Handing me his saffron garb, he had said, 'God has sent you to me to find out if I still have any attachment to this garb of mine Take it—and offer your rich royal robe to the Ganga Go! ' He tied his begging bag around his waist to cover his nakedness, and gave me his saffron garb As I put it on, my mind filled with thoughts of his selfless nobility I honoured his request by offering my royal robe to the Ganga at the time of leaving Kampilya I had no misgivings of any kind, no agitation I had a saffron dress on Above me a blue sky In front, the road to Mahendra

Leaving Kampilya behind, I took the road to Kashi I was no more the world conquering general, I did not have lakhs and lakhs of soldiers under my command, no trumpeting and neighing divisions of elephants and horses, not even my heavy skin armour and flesh ear-rings I had only the saffron garb A calm mind And above my head, the blue sky

I arrived in Prayaga, in the kingdom of Kashi—the city of Vrishali But I was not going to enter the city I led Vayujit to drink at the confluence of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Sarayu While returning, Vayujit stopped exactly at the spot where I first met Vrishali No Vrishali there, no Shon, no broken pot The strange, unfamiliar unease which I felt the first time I saw her had also vanished Everything was absolutely still and calm True, a thought flashed through my mind in sharp reproach If I had a shard of Vrishali's shattered pot, I would have replaced it gently at the same spot I had picked it up, after *pranama ing* the triple confluence of the rivers

I tried in vain to close all the doors of so many memories Battling with them, I departed from the kingdom of Kashi

Leaving behind Eastern Dasharna, I came to the land of Kalinga situated on the shores of the eastern ocean, and bounded by the Mahanadi river It was the birthplace of Supriya and for that reason I should have been drawn to it—but I wasn't Leaving the entire city on one side, I took the adjacent road and reached the lower slopes of Mahendra mountain My heart exulted at the darshan of its sky-blue peak. The bubbling welter of thoughts ceased Now I would have to forget everything—the tournament arena, the *svayamvara*, the dice-game, the world-conquest, the charity offerings, the skin-armour and flesh ear-rings I made up my mind to forget, because I had to approach Bhagavan Parashurama's ashram as a disciple With this mission, humbly, I determined to ascend the Mahendra mountain

I saw a peasant approaching with a plough on his shoulder and I thought happily that the Vayujit problem would now be solved That hard-working peasant who lived by tilling the land at the foothills would be ideal to take care of Vayujit, by keeping an eye while Vayujit champed the nearby grassy fields

"Friend could you please look after my horse until I return?" I stopped him and asked, as I patted Vayujit's back Vayujit's white arched back shivered, his bushy tail shook

"Who are you?" asked the peasant, eying my saffron garb and mutilated ears

"I am Vaikartana You will easily recognise me later by my sliced ear-lobes "

"Are you a sannyasi? Give me the horse I'll look after him " He took Vayujit's reins I patted twice the back of the loyal, single minded beast I felt a pang as I ran my hands through his mane

"Go And be happy " I took leave of Vayujit.

I began my steep ascent of Mahendra as the long rays of the setting sun touched the mountain Eager to return to their nests, flocks of *chittar, saranga, latavaka, chandola, chakravaka,* and other birds fluttered noisily towards clamps of sal, *kimshuka, punnaga, tamal, satona, dandani* and other trees. Cowherds played on bamboo flutes in rhythm to the tinkling neck-bells of the cows as they guided the herd back after a day-long grazing in the slope pastures All animate and inanimate life was yearning for rest

' Wait, sannyasi!" I stopped, hearing the shout from behind me Dressed in saffron like me, I saw a human figure shuffling slowly towards me

"Where are you going?" the figure asked, coming near. It must be a disciple of the ashram, I thought He looked a little older than me

"To Bhagavan Parashurama's ashram," I replied, surprised, without being introduced

"I am going there too I am his disciple My name is Akritavrana Come, we'll go together " He said this, looking at my ears

We began the climb together

"What brings you to our ashram? A darshan of Bhagavan?" he asked as he climbed

"No, not darshan only I wish to study under him I want to be his disciple "

"Disciple? You are a Brahmin, is that so? It is Bhagavan's principle that he accepts as disciple no one who is not a Brahmin But what learning do you wish to acquire?"

"The Brahma-missile," I replied But I was thinking, *Am I going to be disappointed?* I was not a Brahmin's son

"The Brahma-missile! So it's certain that you are a Brahmin's son It was pointless of me to even ask you But but why are your ear-lobes sliced off?" he asked again

For a moment it occurred to me that I should leave him and hurry down the slope, mount Vayujit and ride straight back to Hastinapura But but it was inconceivable that I should return to Hastinapura without the Brahma-missile

"I have donated my ear-flesh as alms to a mendicant in order to plug the massive entrance of heaven " I had to reply, so I replied

"I don't see your meaning," he said, surprised

"Naturally you cannot " I couldn't satisfy him any further What if Bhagavan Parashurama asked me? What Brahmin family was I born into? I hunted for an answer But nothing occurred to me Circumstances had made me say wild and wicked things in front of a weak, helpless woman, now circumstances were making me commit the additional sin of lying Should I stand in front of Parashurama and speak an untruth, or should I return forthwith emptyhanded by the same road that I came? Again, a problem, again, a dilemma, again, a life-upsetting complication

The merit of giving my skin armour and flesh-ear-rings as alms to Indra was going to be cancelled by my speaking an untruth to Bhagavan Parashurama I would remain the son of a charioteer—which is what I was These thoughts fell on my inner self like cataracts on the Mahendra mountain What should I do? Go back? Yes, I would go back

"About time I went back!" I stopped and stunned Akritavrana with this remark

'Why? Lost your nerve? You have to have a lion's courage if you wish to enter Bhagavan Parashurama's ashram Did you think you could enter here with just that roly-poly face of yours like that of a young rishi of the Bhrigu clan ?" He could say this fearlessly, because he was an inmate-disciple of the ashram

"The Bhrigu clan! Lion's courage!" No, no I will not return without the Brahma missile The world will see for itself that even the son of a charioteer has the strength to break the vow of Parashurama What can irascible Parashurama do to a prevaricat-ing Karna? Reduce him to ashes? But the very ashes will proclaim that a son of a charioteer yearned for the Brahma missile and succeeded in breaking Parashurama's vow A part of my mind advised me not to go ahead, but I proceeded with my ascent Should Parashurama enquire about my family antecedents, I would reply, "Bhrigu " If he asked my name, I decided I would reply, "Bhargava "

White in the moonlit night, Mahendra was awesome, because the roars of ravenous beasts of prey made even the moonlight seem to shudder

Both of us stopped in front of the thatched hut of Akritavrana The best part of night was over The ashram consisted of various large and small thatched huts All around, for protection, was a ring of thick clustering thorny creepers In the very centre was a

magnificent *yajna*-pit, visible from all sides I had seen many sacrificial pits but never one so wonderful In one corner was a long cow-shed in which cows were peacefully chewing the cud after their daylong grazing on the slopes of Mahendra The eerie stillness was occasionally pierced by the tinklings of their neck-bells The thatched huts looked like a herd of elephants resting with feet tucked under There was not even a sign of a lamp anywhere because all the ashram pupils were fast asleep The Supreme Being of the sky was pouring silver rasa from the moon-jar on the limbs of Lady Earth In the refuse lying on the boundary of the ashram, on all sides, crickets kept up an incessant chirping

Sparks could be clearly seen, spluttering in the fire-pit of one thatched hut Mumbled mantras could be heard, as if someone was chanting It was midnight, yet someone was still awake, meditating deeply

"Who is in that hut there?" I asked as I followed Akritavrana inside his hut

"Bhagavan Tomorrow is the full moon In order to fulfil his Varuna-vow, he has to continuously chant in the ritual manner the Gayatri sloka of the Savitri mantra on the night before every full-moon and *amavasya* After which, he descends the Mahendra mountain and enters the kingdom of Kalinga All day long he stands waist-deep in the foaming waters of the eastern ocean and offers *arghya*-homage to the Sun The people of Kalinga flock every full moon and *amavasya* to the shores of the ocean in order to have his darshan I also have accompanied him many times to the ocean You will also have occasion to do so " Akritavrana spread two grass mats on the floor, and arranged two blankets on them

Satyasena, Shon, Ashvatthaman, Duryodhana, and many others had entered the orbit of my life And now Akritavrana as well After the meal, as I relaxed on the grass mat, one thought raced in my mind What if Bhagavan Parashurama asked me, tomorrow itself, to accompany him to the kingdom of Kalinga? What would I tell him? All the Kalinga citizens knew me well, How could I go with him to Kalinga? Worrying over this, I fell asleep Never had I slept so peacefully in my palace as I slept that first night in the ashram of Bhagavan Parashurama

4

The day dawned "Om *Isa vasyamidam sarvam* "Om! All this is swaddled by the glory of the Lord " I woke to the sweet sound of prayer from the lips of disciples Finishing my ablutions, I stood along with the others in a row in front of Bhagavan Parashurama's hut The sun rose, and thick-bearded Bhagavan Parashurama emerged from his hut like a thick-maned lion from a cave The sharp blade of his shoulder-borne axe flashed in the sun I had seen any number of rishis at charities and world-conquests At the time of the Rajasuya sacrifice of the Pandavas, I had come across such illustrious penance-doers as Dhaumya, Dhananjaya, Sandipani, Kanva, and Brahmagargya I had also met the easily angered rishi Durvasas But this was the first time I was seeing an impressive pitch-black, thick-bearded, axe-carrying rishi It seemed to me that matted-haired, bearded Shiva had forsaken Mount Kailasa and emerged from that thatched hut Shiva, it seemed, had removed his crescent moon from his head, fixed it in his trident, and slung it on his massive, musuclar shoulder as one would an axe His eyes were blazing as if they could consume the universe They were very like the eyes of Sri Krishna

He walked with slow steps towards the eastern ocean His devoted disciples threw flowers as *anjali* offerings at his feet and prostrated themselves full length before him I was the last in the line

I touched his feet and took the dust to my forehead I felt uplifted that moment

"Who are you?" His voice had the timbre of mace striking mace

"I I am Bhargava of the Bhrigu clan " Ashamed, my conscience felt as blackened as a blood-drenched hand crushed under a chariot-wheel In some corner somewhere a truth-loving Karna was in turmoil

"What brings you here?"

"To learn the secret of the Brahma-missile "

Looking fixedly and surprisedly at me for a long time, Gurudeva knitted his eyebrows Still gazing sharply at me, he said after a few seconds "You must learn to observe ashram discipline strictly Can you do so?"

"Whatever you desire, Gurudeva "

"Very well Go Wash your dirty clothes, and be ready When I return, I will teach you the preliminary invocatory mantras of the Brahma-missile "

Jamadagni's son, massive-bodied Parashurama stepped with grave dignity out of the ashram His glinting axe slowly disappeared from view Akritavrana accompanied him Seeing his back, in some corner of my mind there entered an apprehension of defeat and loss for the first time in my life Some terrible mistake had been made I felt my life was proceeding awry, like a serpent-arrow

5

One by one the days kept passing by The transition into the life-style of the ashram's pupils was quicker than getting used to the life style of the palace warriors I wasn't distracted by anyone's memories any more I had learnt by heart more than half of the maha mantra of the Brahma missile It could be as a result of this that my mind relaxed It never even occurred to me that I should return to the palace My time passed happily in the company of countless fellow-students striving hard for religious salvation And the companionship of Akritavrana always reminded me of Ashvatthaman He had assiduously studied life in all its aspects Listening to him I lost all sense of the passing of time

One day at the end of each month was reserved for a question-and-answer session with Gurudeva It is not always possible for a man to solve all his problems all by himself as he walks on the path of life Many indeed were the topics that were discussed on that day, many perplexities presented

In fact, a lot that I had learnt so far was made clear to me during these sessions During one such session I asked Bhagavan Parashurama ' Bhagavan, what is the highest joy of all? '

"Why don't you tell me first? ' he countered

"Alms giving ' In front of me was the example of my skin-armour and flesh ear-rings

' No In alms giving also there remains that touch of egoism that says, 'I did the giving' So, it is important to keep in mind, from the very beginning, what is best Bhargava, what is the highest mountain in the world?"

"The Himalayas Gurudeva," I replied

"No The mountains of the mind are the highest in the world Compared to the reaches of the mind, the Himalayas are puny That is why the mind must be absolutely firm A firm mind can be established only in a strong body Only the strong can experience the highest joy The weak have neither joy, nor contentment, nor freedom That is why there is provision for training in weapons of war in my ashram The knowledge provided is not for the destruction of mankind, but to battle against the cruel obstacles that are placed in the path of human progress I am instructing you in the secret of the Brahma-missile for the same reason "

"Gurudeva, what is the purpose of human existence? To live on and on for crores of years? Surely not I want to know the supreme and ultimate joy of life Is the joy that you describe the ultimate joy of the mind?"

"No There is an even higher joy. A joy that's not merely the ultimate, but also single, continuous, seamless It's the joy of the atman that sits ensconced in the innermost heart of the mind Who are we? Why have we come into this earth? Where are we going? In what cosmic thread is this simultaneously moving and unmoving universe sewn? Why do the pretty calves and heifers of the ashram frisk as they do? Though they live for only a day, why do the flowers swing and sway and smile on the creepers? Why do clouds reverberate? Why does the wind blow? How does it rain? How does each single unit of the entire universe throb with the cosmic consciousness that pervades all? From what source of energy comes the destructless fire that provides the spark of life to all? To know this, to see this, there exists a marvellous sleeping eye in our body it is called the atman When we decide to open this eye to the world around this world, all problems vanish, and the entire universe becomes an experience of oneness Even the knowledge of a fearful impending calamity is then unable to bring us grief Nothing remains—not even the illusory joy of seeing the fabrication of the entire cosmic structure All that remains is light, dazzling light like that of the sun That is why the joy of the atman is the ultimate joy " He shut his large eyes completely, as if he was intensely desirous of entering that glorious dazzle I knew very well that shutting his eyes meant an end to the questioning

All present folded their palms "Om *Isa vasyam idam* " The deep echoes of the prayer spread beyond the limits of the ashram and reverberated on the slopes of Mahendra mountain

6

One whole year passed without my even being aware of it The beneficial influence of living in Bhagavan Parashurama's ashram was so profound that all arrogant thoughts such as "I am a general" and "I am a Hero of Charities" all but disappeared from my mind I became a pupil, a traveller I realised that all that glittered was not always gold Fame was not the only goal of life I now realised that an awakened consciousness was also required

Soon I had become Gurudeva's favourite disciple Word had it that the other disciples were jealous of me As a result of the meritorious deeds of my past lives, every day spent in the ashram under Bhagavan Parashurama's discipline became an elevating experience Gurudeva repeatedly urged me to go to the kingdom of Kalinga but I kept putting it off on some pretext or other It pained me to do this The other painful thing was the lie I had spoken about my birth Sometimes I felt that as a result of my lying the thatched huts were rushing forward to claw at me And I felt deeply depressed It seemed that I was getting pushed into a corner At such times, in order to find relief, I would proceed with bow and arrow to hunt deer on the slopes of the Mahendra mountain Giving the kill to a Bhil tribal and wiping the sweat on my forehead, I would re-climb the hill and return to the ashram As a result of roaming where I pleased the whole day, I would feel relaxed and happy, and get down to the ashram-routine afresh with new zeal

One day it so happened that I was in one of my depressed moods, so I picked up my bow and arrows and set out to hunt Afternoon had ended In the distance a forest-fire had blazed up from the accidental rubbing of one dry branch with another, and I could see the smoke, from where I was, in one corner of Mahendra mountain The birds had become silent after the cessation of the heat In spite of my varied wandering, I could see no beast anywhere That made me even more upset Exhausted and disappointed, I decided to return to the ashram and wound my way uphill The drops of perspiration on my shorn ears did not easily drip down, they split around the two ends and stopped midway It had become a habit with me to wipe them with my hands—which I now did

sobbed, as he stroked the cow's face I had never seen such heart-touching pain—and all as a result of my hunting! The same skill that shot me to the height of fame in the arena because I could aim straight by sound, now plunged me in the noisy depths of hell itself I, Karna, world-conquering general, the Hero of Charities, the favourite disciple of Bhagavan Parashurama—ah, I had become a cow-butcher! A grossly sinful man I was just a spurned something offered at the altar of fate by a set of unavoidable circumstances

The mortally wounded cow shuddered in a final death-throe, her white-lotus-like head drooping, her foam-covered tongue twisted The lifeless pupils of her eyes looked even more fearful to me than the dice of Uncle Shakuni In no time at all, forest flies and insects were buzzing around, to feast on her corpse I hid my face in my hands in shame and pain

"What do you want, sannyasi? I lost everything today," the old man said, placing a hand on my shoulder The touch turned my flesh to water, as it were I was the killer of his cow—but he did not know this, because I was wearing saffron I bent, touched his feet, and said, "Forgive me, Brahmin Your Shubhada—your cow—I—it was my arrow that caused her death I was out hunting, I mistook her for a wild beast, and killed her by accident Forgive me I'll give you five cows "

For the first time in my life I asked another for something I was a beggar Helpless, for the first time

"Go away " He pushed me away That old man, who an instant ago was sobbing like a child over the loss of his cow, suddenly burst into flaming anger like a *yajna*-fire His lips quivered His eyes emitted sparks "You call yourself sannyasi, and yet you hunt! Why don't you make a bonfire of your ochre robe? You cow-murderer who tries to compensate by offering five cows, will you go and call five women your mothers after the death of your real mother? I'll show you today that my Brahma power is far more fierce than your *tapasya* as a sannyasi "

"No, no! I am not a sannyasi I am a warrior, a disciple of Bhagavan Parashurama " I clasped his feet again

"Get away from me! Your touch is as defiling as cow murder You miserable villain who viciously shoots arrows at a cow, calling yourself a warrior, your chariot wheel will get embedded in the earth in the actual battle like your arrow embedded in the head of

this cow. Try your hardest—but you won't be able to get it out. Go. Go where you will!" He stamped away, leaving behind his dead Shubhada. He had made me his target, I was his victim.

His curse numbed me, deafened me. Instead of my ochre robe, I felt tongues of flame lapping at me from all sides. Life seemed to be dancing all around me with its web of problems. Where was I heading?

As I dragged my heavy body back to the ashram, my curse-afflicted mind was filled with disillusionment. Cruel fate had made the sensitive inner self of warrior Karna its quarry. That curse plunged me into profound quagmire. My mind thrashed about like that dying cow—and screamed in silent agony.

After instructing the Bhil tribal whom I gave my daily hunt to bury the cow, I handed him my inauspicious bow and said, "I've done with hunting from today."

As I climbed the Mahendra slope, I felt my calf-muscles knot and tighten for the first time. As I entered the precincts of the ashram, the tinkling cowbells did not sound sweet to me as they did before; indeed, they jangled fearful and repulsive like music played at a funeral pyre. Without a bite, without even uttering my prayers, I lay down as I was on the cot of *darbha*-grass. I did not even feel like sleeping. A despair that would shame even death had gripped me. The crickets around the ashram kept up an insistent, shrill chirping.

7

That incident was the cause of more anguish in me than even the slicing of my skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings had produced. I couldn't speak out my pain to anyone in the ashram. There are some sorrows that are best endured in silence. No one succeeds in unravelling the black threads from the white in such sorrows of the memory. But one does try to mitigate the blackness of the black threads as best one can. That is what is known as life. Life may not be an increase in happiness; it is often a diminishing of sorrow.

I received invaluable help from Akritavrana in that state. A deep bond of friendship had grown between us in a short time. He showed the greatest concern for all that I did. He gave new suggestions. Listening to them, I felt even the cow-murder lie less heavy on me.

Driving the black and white steeds of night and day, the chariot of Kala the Spirit of Time raced in the arena of innumerable incidents Wherever a man lives, he develops an attraction for the life around him A sense of nearness grows inevitably I felt a similar closeness to the Mahendra mountain As I scoured its slopes and fastnesses in search of firewood, seeing drops of dew on grassblades in the open fields, I was reminded of Ashvatthaman's remark that life was nothing but an evanescent dew-drop My mind bubbled with memories of his various pronouncements on life "Karna, search your atman to discover who you are Be firm in your inner self Collect yourself " His words were unforgettable—as Vrishali was, of whom I was reminded by every forest plantain tree And when I saw the straight stem of the fragrant flower pandanus, honest and loving Shon came in front of my eyes The sight of the massive banyan made me wish to compare it with Grandsire Bhishma The placid waters of the Mahanadi woke memories of my father and mother But when the waters became turbulent, I saw in them Duryodhana A thorny stretch of land brought Guru Drona to mind, and lichen in thick-green fields created the image of Uncle Shakuni Memories are like one's own shadows They tail one's mind Seeing Bhagavan Parashurama always reminded me of Sri Krishna, and the incident of Shishupala's decapitation would swing into my horizon After that episode, I had not met Sri Krishna at all—and now I was not even very eager to meet him

My days in the ashram were slipping away in continuous flow of Kala My tired mind, before it dropped off to sleep at night, recalled the events of my past from childhood to the present, and wondered where my destiny was taking me But has anyone ever succeeded in making destiny a target for such speculation? If a person were really able to plumb what's hidden in one's destiny, wouldn't all the conflicts and tensions and confusions of life have stopped a long time ago? Obviously that can never be Every individual lives on hope I too lived in the hope that I would obtain the Brahma-missile More than two years had elapsed since I left Hastinapura The mantras to obtain the Brahma-missile were almost all completed This missile gave power even over the energy of the sun All matter could be melted by its strength, including so-called divine phenomena and molecular gases It was the ultimate weapon

And Bhagavan Parashurama had passed on this extraordinary weapon to me on a full-moon night with the help of mantras capable of causing disease and death After pouring the sacred water in my palm for me to sip, he said to me gravely, "Bhargava, this is the secret of the Brahma-missile Never release this weapon on a weak or unarmed adversary If you do so, it will rebound on you The purpose of being strong is to protect the weak "

"As you say, Bhagavan " For the first time I placed my head with shraddha at the feet of a person other than my father and mother I felt infinitely blessed Grateful tears from my eyes wet his feet

"My Varuna-vow ends today In order to complete it, I shall stand all day in the waters of the eastern ocean My eyes are heavy with night-long chanting of the Gayatri mantra My last four days have passed in fasting I want you to accompany me to the kingdom of Kalinga I'm feeling a little tired " He instructed me, as he rose from his tiger-skin seat

In front of me appeared the ultimate question I steeled my mind and nodded agreement No vacillation I did not like the idea of denying him anything at the time of leaving the Mahendra mountain We departed from the ashram to the accompaniment of enthusiastic cheers from the pupils My hand trembled as I waved farewell to Akritavrana

The day had just dawned as we crossed the ashram boundary The absence of my skin-armour made me smart under the intense heat of the sun But as I descended the slope of the mountain with my guru, I was in a pensive mood The fact that I had succeeded in obtaining the Brahma-missile made me pleased with my achievement

"Bhargava, I have never asked you, but today I feel as if I should "

"Ask, *Gurudeva* I will answer as best I can," I said humbly

"Why are your ear lobes cut off?" I felt as if hit on my head with his battle-axe

"An old Brahmin needed my ear-rings I could not give them to him without cutting my ear-lobes So I sliced them off " I came out with the truth

"Splendid! Your conduct becomes that of a member of the Bhargava family I am assured that the secret of the Brahma-

missile is safe in your hands " The front of his battle-axe gleamed My throat was dry What if he asked the name of the Brahmin? But he did not say anything

We kept walking till we reached the roots of a giant banyan Climbing down the rocky slope had bathed us in sweat The thick shade of the banyan looked inviting

"Bhargava, you are very quiet Let's rest a while under this banyan Then we'll proceed," Gurudeva advised After four days of fasting he had become weak His voice sounded faint Spreading his tiger-skin under the tree, he lay down on it The fasting, the early rising, and the mountain descent had exhausted him It was the last day of his Varuna-vow "Bhargava, get me a stone to place under my head," he said, closing his eyes

I looked right and left, but failed to spot a suitable stone I felt miserable that I could not satisfy such a small wish of the great ascetic who had given me the secret of the Brahma-missile

Instantly I knelt and, raising his head with my hands, laid it on my thigh Feeling the ochre cloth of my thigh, he opened his eyes in *abhiman* and said, "Bhargava, this is all the guru-*dakshina* I expect from you But don't interrupt my sleep Sleep and one's word should never be broken "

He slept there, peacefully, in the lap of Karna the son of a charioteer—that magnificent warrior, divine ascetic, son of Jamadagni, that hero of heroes A host of thoughts clamoured for attention in my mind Many people had rained flowers on me, had hailed me as victor, but I had never in my life experienced such a supremely auspicious day Relaxing in my lap was the greatest of gurus, who could terrorise even the greatest of Kshatriyas!

His head was shining, he breathed evenly, but my thoughts raced about That day was *the* fulfilment of my life—it was a day of thanksgiving

Time passed Filtering through the tree-leaves, some sunrays lingered on his beard Sensing his sleep about to be disturbed, I cupped my palms umbrella fashion and shielded his face from the sunrays Gurudeva's breathing resumed its relaxed quality

I breathed heavily, feeling the scorching sun on my hands I wanted so much the course of my life somehow to end here, and the brave warrior who destroyed all perpetrators of injustice and atrocity to continue sleeping gently in my lap for ever

His axe lay beside him I looked gravely at its blade A sharp-toothed black beetle was scurrying on it—I could make that out from its appearance Fascinated, I kept staring at that helpless miniscule insect He circled the blade easily enough a couple of times It occurred to me that human life was very much like that insect's we keep scurrying insect-like on life's sharp blade

Suddenly that wood beetle slipped off the blade, gliding slowly towards my thigh which cradled Bhagavan Parashurama's head I thought I should flick it away, but that would involve jerking my body and that in turn would make the intense sunrays fall on Gurudeva's face That could break his sleep "One's word, and one's sleep should never be broken That is the guru *dakshina* I want from you " These words of his boomed in my ears So I sat stock-still, unmoving, ready to face with determination anything, come what may

Slowly but surely the wood-beetle slithered under my thigh Nibbling through my ochre robe, it sank its sharp teeth in the folds of my thigh An unbearable pain shot through me, thigh to head How excellent would it have been if I had had my impenetrable skin-armour! The thought flashed through my mind, but I brushed it aside I would have to pass my entire life patiently, as Karna, on the strength of my exploits I was not going to cry over what might have happened, or what would have happened if that did not happen The beetle began systematically biting my thigh all over My ochre robe became drenched with blood Countless arrows of agony sped from my thigh to my head The suffering of slicing my skin-armour and gifting it away was not as terrifying as this pain But I kept my eyes closed and clenched my teeth, because tolerating it was the only way I could fulfil my guru *dakshina* Like a locust stripping bare a branch, the beetle was bit by bit gnawing my thigh away That despicable insect was drinking merrily my blood which even the ferocious tigers of dense Varanavata could not taste This was the first time in my life that I experienced the two in conflict—my mental determination and my physical agony This was the crucial testing moment This was the moment of mental strength, of fortitude and patience Biting and drinking my life-blood, the beetle crept its way ahead

The agony seemed to turn my blood to water, and drenched my head in the form of perspiration I could not even stretch my hand to wipe my head Sweat and blood What more precious tribute

than this could I offer to Bhagavan Parashurama? As if to ask this very question, a thick trickle of blood flowed towards the edge of the axe-blade, crimsoning and obscuring it. The beetle had shredded my thigh, opening, as it were, a path into my future. Crawling through the orifice, it crept all over the beard of Bhagavan Parashurama. My lips trembled at the thought that his sleep would be interrupted. Was that insect going to attack his body? Could a petty insect reduce two human lives to hollow emptiness? Staring up at the sky, I prayed to the all-powerful deity Surya that the beetle should not touch Gurudeva's body. At the feel of my thigh's warm blood, Gurudeva suddenly scrambled awake.

He flicked the beetle off his beard. I had no words for the turmoil in my mind. Would Bhagavan say, "Bhargava, the world has seen many disciples, and will see many more, but your guru-*dakshina* is special." But... but he said nothing of the sort.

Gurudeva must have grasped the situation in a flash. Picking up his blood-covered axe, he stretched his forehead so tight that his eyebrows seemed to touch the hair on his matted head. He asked, "Such fortitude! Such self-control! Tell me, Bhargava, which family do you come from?"

"Bhrigu," I replied, raising my thigh from the puddle of blood. My mind was even more blood-soaked than my thigh.

"Liar. You are not a Brahmin. No Brahmin can endure such pain. Which Kshatriya family do you belong to? Tell me. And tell me the truth."

"I—I am not a Kshatriya. I am Karna, the son of a charioteer." I spoke with a firmness that I did not have even when I stoically bore the shredding of my thigh. What was going to happen, was going to happen. The axe would fall on my head. The spirit would leave its body-cage and fly away. Irate Parashurama would strike the axe on my head. The axe-blade would become my fortunate means to salvation.

"Karna! Are you the same Karna of Hastinapura, the flesh-ear-ringed-and-skin-armoured Karna? The Karna who gifted his flesh-ear-rings-and-skin-armour to Indra?"

"Yes. I have no flesh-ear-rings now—and no skin-armour. I have gifted them to Indra. That is why this beetle could burrow through my thigh."

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"Vrishali, a son's life is moulded exactly the way a mother brings him up Like this milk—put sugar in it, and it becomes nectar, put salt in it, and it goes to waste It would be a very astounding thing indeed if our sons, who have received the most loving upbringing from you, turn out to be anything less than heroes and victors " I drank the milk By this time, Duryodhana, having received the message from Satyasena, hurriedly came to the palace, adjusting his slipping shawl

"*Pranama, bhabhi-ji*," he greeted Vrishali Accepting his wishes, Vrishali left

"Raja of Anga, where's the Brahma-missile?" was his very first question

"Raja, would I have returned without the Brahma-missile?" As I said this, a pang throbbed through my body

"Victory to you! The Pandavas' pride will be obliterated now, soon enough Today they complete twelve years of forest-exile, and go for a year's incognito exile "

"So so let us have our spies on their tail from today itself If they are spotted, they will have to accept another twelve years of forest-exile " The cunning move of the Pandavas was to protect Arjuna by sending Indra to me Life doesn't go by ideals, one has to be down-to-earth

"Karna, our expert spies have already been despatched everywhere—to every kingdom, forest, secluded area, city, place of pilgrimage—not just that, they will make every effort to locate the Pandavas even in caves I'm desperately trying to find out their whereabouts but but members of our family have hidden them The Grandsire, the great Vidura, the chief minister, and Guru Drona—all of them are not what they seem to be The Pandavas are definitely getting daily information about what goes on here "

"Raja, what if the worst comes to the worst? The Pandavas will be discovered, they will declare war, but I have the ability and means to face them No one can now destroy you "

"Raja of Anga, you know I depend entirely on you If that time ever comes, you will be the first commander-in-chief of the Kaurava forces "

"Fine Act on that basis then I will stand by the word I give you I will not wash my feet until I have killed Arjuna "

"I will leave now and let you take rest " He rose and strode out of the palace with the grand gait of an elephant This was the brave

8

Mindful of the curse and with a shattered heart, I steeled myself as I entered Hastinapura Problems and reverses—these are the ways an individual's character is tested Even in this condition, I was confident that I would defeat Arjuna What was the point in whining over one's difficulties? Heroes do not lose heart even in the most adverse situations They stand upright, with their feet planted on the head of the problem

As he held Vayujit's reins, Satyasena looked at me with staring eyes No one in the city recognised me in my ochre robes I was returning to Hastinapura after two years At the time of leaving, I wore royal robes—now I was returning in ascetic garb

'Satyasena, is Raja Duryodhana in the capital? If so, inform him that I have arrived," I instructed, as I climbed the stairs The stairs of the palace were experiencing the feel of my blood for the first time

I had to forget everything now For those who always look behind them life is an abyss I did not want any past event impressing the tablet of my heart I did not want to brood on what I was in the past, or who I was What am I now? How will I be? The time had come to decide on this, with all my strength

Removing my ochre dress, I put on royal robes Vrishali smeared herbal lotion on my thigh, bandaging it hurriedly with a strip she tore from her shawl, making no enquiry this time how I had come to be wounded She was a wise wife, experience had taught her that the contentment of a wife is best assured by feasting her eyes on her travel weary husband How mature and sublime she looked She had always been bandaging my wounds in this fashion I had traversed the four corners of the earth with her hand thus held in mine I had extinguished the flames of all possible future sorrows by drowning them in the honey of her love

'Vrishali, are father and mother, Shon, our sons and daughter well? I asked first, to forestall her asking me anything about my wound

'They are all well, they were all thinking of your welfare Vrishasena, Sushena, Susharma—you won't be able to even recognise them, they're shot up so tall in these two years, and Vrishaketu is just like you, he's always going to the bank of the Ganga, as you did, to perform the *arghya*-ritual " She said this as she handed me a bowl of milk

Pandavas simply could not take that risk My guess was that the Pandavas were hiding somewhere in a cold, inaccessible cave in the Himalayas Therefore, ravines, mountain slopes and caves were combed, as were the forests of Dharma, Naimisha, and Varanavata The spies wore themselves out on the mountain ranges of Soma, Pariyatra, Vindhya, Nishadha, Govardhana, Shuktimat, Mekala, Riksha, Malla, and Gandhamadana Even the ashrams of Gautama, Jahnu, Durvasas, Valmiki, Vasishtha, Kashyapa, Bhrigu, Chyavana, Harita and Rishyashringa were searched inside out in the belief that the Pandavas were disguised as disciples Not a sign of them anywhere! One doubt rankled in my mind—could it be that the king of the gods, Indra, who had begged flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour off me for the sake of Arjuna, had secreted the Pandavas in heaven?

Prabhanjana was firmly ensconced in Hastinapura, with his eyes fixed on the noble Vidura's thatched hut The Pandavas were certainly going to surface in order to meet the Queen Mother, or at least arrange to send her a message But even this wasn't happening The impression gained ground that they were, who knows, dead The incognito year was approaching its end Only a couple of days were left, when the most painful of all news was despatched by one of the Viratnagar spies to Hastinapura The news was simply this—that someone had literally with his bare fists pummelled to death the general of the Virata army, Kichaka The moment I heard this incredible piece of information, the image of huge-bodied Kichaka who had fought against me in Matsya during my world-conquering mission, rose in front of my eyes Only Bhima had the strength to kill in this manner So it was evident that Bhima was hiding in Viratnagar And Arjuna as well I began thinking furiously

Soon enough Duryodhana summoned an emergency meeting of the Sabha He reminded Ashvatthaman and all others present of the fact that they had been patronised by the Kauravas Then it was unanimously decided that an attack be launched on Viratnagar with the aim of stealing the thousands of cows in the cattle-sheds of the kingdom The Pandavas would emerge from hiding in order to save the cows, and be trapped in the penalty of breaking their word—which would lead to a second forest-exile for them

Suddenly war-bugles sounded Crack soldiers of the Kaurava army assembled in front of the magnificent palace The soldiers

warrior who had revolutionised my life by crowning me Raja of Anga

A year's incognito exile Gazing at the Ganga from the window, I began to reflect A flock of six *karandava* birds flew swiftly out of the waters towards the east But one among them was left behind Fluttering its wings, turning its beak towards the palace, it winged its way to the west Every instant saw it separated further and further from the other five of the flock I shut the window

A year's incognito exile Well, every life is a kind of incognito exile An undertaking to be as far away from suffering as possible But surrounded on all sides by extreme forms of suffering My life was one such In the seventyfive years of my life, how many significant events and powerful emotions had happened—and how many ups and downs had fallen to my lot! Not one seemed to be linked with the other And God alone knew if there was going to be a link in the future

9

One by one the months passed, but the spies were not able to get information about the Pandavas Thinking of Bhima all the time made Duryodhana physically unwell Kamboja, Kashmira, Gandhara, Panchanada, Sind, Kulinda, Tangana, Videha, Panchala, Kosala, Kirata, Kamarupa, Banga, Magadha, Chedi, Dasharna, Kalinga, Vidarbha, Avanti, Dvarika, Surashtra, Anarta, Mathura, Virata—he sent fresh batches of messengers to assist the spies in these kingdoms In various disguises, they searched for the Pandavas with grim determination Every week bitter reports of failure reached the palace Duryodhana's ill-health worsened Clouds of doubt gathered thickly

In Dvarika some of the spies had got themselves employed as servants in the palace of Sri Krishna On the basis of their secret reports, Duryodhana even paid a visit to Gandhara It never even occurred to him that Sri Krishna could mislead him

Once he got news from the spies in Dvarika that the Pandavas were hiding in Viratnagar itself in the kingdom of Virata Immediately Duryodhana prepared to go and look for them there The Matsya territory of the Viratas was contiguous to Hastinapura The Pandavas could not be so careless as to seek shelter there The kingdom of Virata was on the other bank of the Yamuna—the

Like the sky suddenly overcast with an approaching nor'wester, thousands of arrows descended upon us from behind on the bank of the Yamuna like flocks of *chitraratha* birds. The arrows created a firm barricade on the river bank. The galloping cows, seeing the barricade, hesitated and, turning their faces, reversed towards Virata. To stop them, our soldiers rushed behind them. In front stood the Virata army. In front stood a blue-complexioned charioteer. Charioteer or general? We couldn't make out. He kept shooting a steady shower of arrows. I looked at him intently. Yes, it was Arjuna—my enemy, standing in front of me after a gap of thirteen years.

Arjuna! Frustrator of my life-flow again and again! Shredder of my young son Sudamana! Intoxicated with pride because he wore the blue lotus garland round his neck.

"Arjuna, wait!"

Bow uplifted, I ran towards him. Flanking me on my left was Shon, and on my right Ashvatthaman, all three of us advancing. Arrow clashed against arrow. Starry sparks flashed in daytime. Panicking cows in midfield of battle scattered helter-shelter for safety in the adjacent forest. There seemed to be no conclusive end to the battle. The sun was still high.

Suddenly a fragrant breeze blew which, as it entered the soldiers' nostrils, made them drop down unconscious where they stood—proof that the nerve-numbing weapon was fired by Arjuna. The weapon that releases a sweet-smelling gas that renders its inhaler unconscious, made from crushed mahua flowers, which Arjuna stuffed into and fired from wooden pipe-guns. I tried to remember the best weapon for neutralising this gas. Everything around me seemed to be swirling. My bow slipped from my hands, my head struck the chariot-floor as I fell with a thud. I lost consciousness.

The first person I saw on recovering my senses was Ashvatthaman. He was sprinkling water on my face. I rose and looked all around me. Hundreds of unconscious Kaurava soldiers littered the field like boulders scattered on a barren landscape. Their multi-coloured upper garments had been removed. My blue upper garment was also missing. Brave Duryodhana lay on his stomach on the swampy border of Virata, like an elephant trapped in a bog. Ashvatthaman was trying his best to revive the stricken soldiers by sprinkling on their faces water which he carried in a helmet. My

who had taken part in my world-conquering mission were now going to steal cows! I felt uneasy. In some corner of my mind clouds of doubt had gathered. The boat of my life was swaying and floating aimlessly. Where were we heading?—with the exception of Duryodhana and myself, no one knew.

"Viratnagar!" General Duryodhana pointed the city to be attacked to the soldiers. Hundreds of thousands of horses were reined at readiness. Conch-shells blew.

"Maharaja Duryodhana—"

"Victory to him!" Sky-rending shouts. How high up did those cries reach? I craned my neck upwards to find out. I noticed a white-haired elderly man, lost in thought, on a white palace balcony: Grandsire Bhishma, his hand on his cheek, staring at the vast dry blankness of the sky, realising that his words in the Kaurava sabha were not worth even two *cowries*.

One by one all of us—Ashvatthaman, maternal uncle Shakuni, Duhshasana, Shon, and myself—stationed ourselves at the respective ranks of the army, and marched swiftly in the direction of Viratnagar. Leading us was Duryodhana, with sword upraised. No one was prepared now to accept the senile leadership of Grandsire Bhishma. Only Duryodhana, strong as a sal tree, deserved that honour.

The Viratas were caught napping. Even in their dream they hadn't imagined they would be attacked. They were busy doing their daily tasks. Taking advantage of this excellent opportunity, Duhshasana's cavalry sped like an arrow through the cattle-sheds. The neck-ropes of thousands of cows were severed. Thousands of cows, frightened by the hooves of the horses, mooing and clashing horns, knocked down the fencing of the enclosure, and galloped out in whichever direction the soldiers of Duhshasana bellowed. Surrounding the white, black, brown and red large-uddered cows, Duhshasana's soldiers raced back to their own kingdom's border, trampling everything that lay in their path.

Seeing their cattle-wealth robbed in front of their eyes, the citizens of Virata assembled their army. Conches, drums and bugles reverberated. We could see the Viratas chasing us.

Leaving a large *sami*-bush behind us, we arrived at the bank of the Yamuna which demarcates the territory of Hastinapura and Virata. Across the Yamuna lay Hastinapura, with just the river in between.

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heart splintered to pieces, as it were, experiencing the shame, the blame, and the aimlessness of it all What if Ashvatthaman had not revived me Better that I had remained senseless on the field Better the unconscious condition than the shameful state When one is unconscious one does not feel the stings of conscience

All of a sudden, flinging away his water-filled helmet, Ashvatthaman screamed It was like the agonised cry of a tail-severed tiger

"Karna! Run!"

What happened? I had the sensation of someone sliding a sword of terror along my throat Why did Ashvatthaman scream like this—the same Ashvatthaman, the son of my guru, Ashvatthaman the wise one who periodically instructed me in the subtle truth of the immortality of the atman? Why was that learned expounder of the destructibility of the human body so agitated?

Leaping over the bodies of the unconscious soldiers, I approached him The spectacle I saw in front of me froze my blood I felt faint even without inhaling the poison gas The whole vast expanse of earth seemed reduced to the smallness of an arrowhead Arjuna had sliced off the head of life-precious brother and flung it to the dust—the same Shon whose lotus-mouth lovingly addressed me as "Vasu-bhaiya " The sole companion of my life's joys and sorrows was no more Surely he must be knocking at the door of heaven in order to recover the flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour which had been taken away from his brother by fraud

Who now would drive Vasu-bhaiya's chariot? Who now would run behind the chariot, hands upraised, shouting, "Where are you going, leaving me behind?" Who will run in circles around Vrishali, like a little boy, shouting *"Bhabhi! Bhabhi!"* Who would go now to the Ganga in the blistering heat to bring back the shawl that I had absentmindedly left behind? Who happily hand me the items to be donated in charity? Who fall and thump his head at my feet, imploring, "Don't give away the flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour! Don't!" Who would now bury his face and weep in Radha-mata's lap? Who would keep on pestering me to eat more at meals? Who will make Meghamala and Minakshi aware of Vasu-bhaiya's love? "Bhaiya, your ear-rings have lost their lustre!"—who would frantically warn me now like this? My Shon who, an instant ago, was whirling his sword astride a horse, was now lying in the dust of horses' hooves It was bright daylight, but

darkness had descended on me I could not believe what I saw My mouth became dry My head was numb

"Ashvatthaman, Shon is no more " I laid my head on the shoulder of my guru's son and sobbed helplessly One wheel of my life's chariot had been shattered Now all I could do was drag and slide along, live because there was nothing else to do

"Bhaiya, will you soar higher and still higher, like Garuda?" Shon—you who said this—where have you gone today, how high, never again to be seen by us?

"Karna, be calm," Ashvatthaman wiped his eyes and tried in vain to console me

Shon's helmet had toppled in this very city at the time of the world-conquering mission, and crushed under the foot of an elephant That memory made me feel as if my heart was breaking into pieces His round, golden head lay in the dust like a ripe *kokam*-fruit The lifeless trunk looked like a log of wood covered with dust

I bent and quickly picked up his head Tears gushed from my eyes Overcome with emotion, I smelt his forehead and said in anguish, "Shon, once just this once, please say to me, 'Vasu-bhaiya' I will smash the door of heaven itself and bring you back " But he did not utter one word Nor would he ever do so If he had even an iota of life-energy left, he would have said, "Bhaiya, keep applying medicine on Vayujit's hooves Your divine crown is safe in the vault where ornaments are stored Look after Radha-mata Give my last respectful *pranama* to *Bhabhi* Vrishali The shells which I collected in my boyhood on the banks of the Ganga—please give them to Minakshi's son And and don't take any other person as your charioteer I will return to serve you Vasu-bhaiya, *pra na ma*!"

But but nothing like that happened Nor would it ever happen We were so close to each other all our lives, we discussed all our joys and sorrows, but at the final moment we could not even meet Where could I get another brother-in-law for Vrishali now? Where was the vesture of consolation with which I could wipe Radha-mata's tears? Where would I get the courage to wipe off the vermilion tilak of marriage on Meghamala's forehead? In whose hands could I now place the world-conquest victory-flag? And who could I discuss my life's ups and downs with? "Shon, the young do not advise the old '—who was there now for me to show

anger at, with these words? "Shon! Shon!" My heart called out to him, like the *chatak*-bird in the heat of summer. I was absolutely alone now. Life was now an ocean of disillusionment. Everything was endless, meaningless quarrel and chaos and bitterness. A sky-vast hollow pit had opened in my stomach. All my five life-forces were flooding out in tears through my eyes. So much blood had not drained out of me even at the time I gifted away my flesh-earrings and skin-armour or at the time when my thigh was shredded on Mahendra hill.

I closed forever his half-open eyes with my forefinger. My only desire was that he should not get to see me impure, undignified and unable to help. I closed his eyes so that he might never again get a glimpse of this cruel, only seemingly beautiful world.

"Go, Shon, go without fear. The world has turned its face away from Karna, today you have done the same. But go fearlessly." Saying this to myself, I picked up his head and fitted it to his trunk. I had no cloth to cover his face. I had been gifting away expensive silks to others, but I had nothing to place on the body of my own brother. I felt miserably desolate.

Breaking his vow of never opening his head-cloth, Ashvatthaman started unwinding it to cover Shon's face. I held his hands. I tore a strip from Vayujit's saddle-cloth and covered Shon's body. One hand of my beloved brother remained uncovered. The sword which he held in his hand at the time of decapitation was still clutched tightly. I stooped, and somehow, with great effort, pried it out. Standing up, with the sword uplifted, I shouted powerfully, "Shon, only one, Arjuna or Karna, will live in this world. Only one!" The very thought of Arjuna made poisonous currents speed through my body. My entire body trembled with anguish. I felt as if all my nerves would explode with the conflicting emotions of sorrow and anger.

I had made a vow, but what use was it? The killing of Arjuna would not restore the life of Shon. Shon was no more in the world—this was a bitter truth, but it was the only truth. Flinging away the sword, I fell on the strip of cloth that covered Shon, and wept hysterically. I was not the Raja of Anga, I was not the world-conquering commander-in-chief, I was not the Hero of Charities, nor was I the disciple of Parashurama. For that matter, I was not even Karna any more. I was just an individual who with a broken heart was lamenting the cruel slaughter of a dearly-loved brother. I was simply a human being—just a human being.

10

My heart was all numb after completing the last rites for Shon on the bank of the Yamuna Why do intimates as precious as one's own life leave mid-way and depart forever? What is life all about? A game of a couple of hours? Nothing made sense I didn't know what to do I returned to Hastinapura with my mind still trammelled in the web of disillusionment in the wake of Shon's death One emotion over-rode all else Take revenge on Arjuna! Revenge on the powerful foe Arjuna responsible for killing my own brother!

Someone had carried the news to the palace It was unbearable to listen to the lamentations of Radha-mata, Vrishali, and Meghamala "Where is my foe-terrorising son?" I had no answer to Radha-mata's question "Where is my all-in all, elder brother?" I had no answer to Meghamala's question I could not bear the sight of Vrishali beating her breasts and weeping for Shon

Fifteen days passed, and no one could believe that Shon was not in their midst It was the cold month of Kartika and the palace marble was frozen Shon's death had frozen our hearts, as it were But it had to end some time or other But the heart is not like ice to melt at the touch of warm tears It is made of adamantine stone The more it wallows in grief, the worse it gets Only one thing works—and that is forgetting Forgetting is Nature's supreme gift to man What if that gift was not there? A man would go wild under the burden of all his varied memories

I tried to get a grip on myself I had to survive I had to shoot an arrow to pierce the neck of Arjuna who had sliced Shon's jugular My life was frittering away in a welter of indecision and confusion Only one avenue was now left—revenge It had to be revenge Revenge at any cost I must track Arjuna down, and finish him off

For this reason, I went to Duryodhana's palace to advise him to keep the army in readiness "Raja, I want the army at instant notice Why—don't ask "

' Raja of Anga, not just I but all of Aryavarta knows what my army is capable of But I am still worried," he replied, knitting his brows

"Why the worry?"

"A messenger arrived today from Raja Drupada, with an offer of peace with the Pandavas in exchange for half the kingdom I am thinking that I should accept the offer '

"No, no peace, no reconciliation If you decline to fight, I'll take on *the Pandavas alone But I will not compromise* " I couldn't make out the reason for his vacillation Perhaps the Viratnagara defeat had disheartened him

"No, Karna Sri Krishna will be turning up again with a fresh offer of reconciliation with the Pandavas The Pandavas have left Viratnagara and are now residing in Upaplavya Sri Krishna has also come there The Pandavas are gaining strength every day "

"Raja, all my life I've listened to you It's time now for you to listen to me I am always ready to fight the Pandavas Declare war on them "

"Karna, I also have no desire to give anything to the Pandavas but, after seeing how Arjuna singly routed us in Viratnagara, I'm having second thoughts on how we are going to face all five of them "

"All those rajas whom I have humbled in my world-conquest mission will be on our side Send word to them today itself Five? Why, even fifty Pandavas are no match for us—that is, if they fight fair "

"Very well I have no objection to war with the Pandavas if we are assured of such help I will write letters to all of them but they will go in your name If they agree, only then will I turn down the peace proposal from Sri Krishna "

"Send the messengers " I gave permission for the letters to go in my name Only one misgiving troubled me, and that related to Sri Krishna

11

The messengers despatched by Duryodhana to different king doms returned with the news that the powerful monarchs of Avanti, Chedi, Magadha, Samshaptaka, Sindha and other lands were ready to help us militarily

Everyone had a vague inkling that Sri Krishna would arrive from Upaplavya with a peace proposal In fact, his *purohita,* the rishi Brahmagargya, had in this connection already been in Hastinapura and met Grandsire Bhishma and Vidura No one had any idea about their confabulations However, the arrival date of Sri Krishna was now known the full-moon night of Kartika He would demand half the kingdom for the Pandavas The Kaurava

warriors had decided on an outright refusal The killing of Shon had troubled not only me but all the Kaurava heroes My Garuda-mind was perched on the highest pinnacle of anger One decision was absolute—war with the Pandavas, a final, conclusive war Drag Arjuna down to the ghat of his doom—though this decision was irrevocable, yet I, like the others, had respect for Sri Krishna, the emissary of peace proposals

Dispelling the morning mist, the full-moon day of Kartika arrived Admirers of Sri Krishna in the city decorated their front doors with festoons of *ashoka* and mango springs Sprinkling their courtyards with scented water, they had painted beautiful *alpana*-designs in different parts of their houses Flags and arches were adorned with flowers An extra-devout follower of Sri Krishna had gone to the extent of making his wife illustrate the killing of Shishupala in *alpana* in his courtyard At each threshold was placed a golden pitcher filled with Ganga-water Freshly bathed married women were busy lighting the *arati* lamps for worship The respected counsellor Vidura had hoisted the special flag of the Kauravas on the palace top This was the first time that the citizens of Hastinapura were going to get a darshan of Sri Krishna Though Sri Krishna was coming with peace proposals on behalf of the Pandavas, there wasn't the least disrespect for him in my mind My enmity was with the Pandavas, with all those who had belittled me, with Arjuna who had killed my son and my loved brother It was the enmity of the son of a charioteer for a Kshatriya It was not directed at Sri Krishna In every object I saw Shon and Sudamana, for which reason the very mention of Arjuna's name was to me anathema

Leaving Upaplavya, he camped near the small town of Vrikasthala on the bank of the Ganga The citizens had decorated the road till that point The all-feeling fingers of the young rising sun caressed Hastinapura A medley of joyful sounds from the border reached to the palace itself—a clear indication that Sri Krishna had arrived at the border I went with Ashvatthaman to welcome him He was preparing to enter Hastinapura after leaving Vrikasthala

Four people sat inside a beautifully gold-decorated chariot pulled by seven pure-white horses Yuyudhana, Brahmagargya, Sri Krishna, and the charioteer Daruka Sri Krishna's blue complexion had the same dazzling lustre that I had seen years ago in Indraprastha Seeing him, I thought, *I have no skin armour as I*

used to have, and I felt depressed. I felt the lack deeply Seeing me, the chief of the Yadavas, Sri Krishna, smiled His teeth, white as an elephant's tusk, shone in the golden rays of the sun I gazed intently at the crown on his head Its workmanship was identical with that of my own—which was stored in the jewellery vault—and this surprised me

"*Pranama*, Raja of the Yadavas," adjusting my shawl, I welcomed him respectfully Why doesn't he realise the injustices that Arjuna has done to me? "May you live long, Karna," he said gently

Grandsire Bhishma, Vidura, Vrishavarman, Drona and others ringed his chariot as it drove into Hastinapura. The orchestrated sounds of the musical instruments shook the leaves of the trees lining both sides of the thoroughfare

With a great outpouring of bhakti the citizens showered fragrant flowers and vermilion powder on him Folding his palms, smiling, he acknowledged their affection The robe of Daruka was completely covered with flowers and vermilion He could not drive properly the chariot of Sri Krishna, because the horses' eyes were obscured with vermilion powder and, besides, hundreds of citizens were falling prostrate on the horses' hooves in front of Sri Krishna The chariot could proceed only a few arm's-lengths in the course of a whole half-hour The potsful of water married ladies poured on the hooves began to wash away the *alpana*-designs which they had so painstakingly designed The sun rose high

"Bhagavan Sri Krishna, Raja of the Yadavas "

Forgetting the heart-rending death of Shon, the excited citizens began shouting, "Victory to Sri Krishna! Victory to Sri Krishna!"

No welcome in Hastinapura had ever produced such reverberations as this did The vermilion powder transformed the white horses into bright-red steeds So much vermilion coloured Sri Krishna's robe that it must have been difficult even for Sri Krishna to imagine that his robe was originally yellow-coloured The entire main road was heaped with flowers As I rode calmly on Vayujit in the royal procession, it seemed to me for an instant that I was in the realm of heaven itself But there was no sign of Duryodhana in all that joy and excitement

In the blinding light of the afternoon sun the flower-and-kumkum-covered chariot of Sri Krishna halted in front of the main entrance of Hastinapura's ancient palace Shaking off the kumkum

from his body, and adjusting his shawl, he gracefully descended from the chariot Vrishali, along with the other ladies, performed the ritual *arati* in front of him With a trembling hand she placed a vermilion tilak on his broad forehead This was the first time in her life that she had seen Sri Krishna

Sri Krishna looked up at the triangular royal ochre pennant on the palace roof, and crossed the threshold of the main entrance Someone said, "The palace has been blessed today "

"Raja, I don't want to go anywhere now but to the assembly hall Let us go there " He said this softly, looking at the closed, moist eyelids of Maharaja Dhritarashtra who was standing there to welcome him

"As you say, Raja of the Yadavas " The maharaja indicated his consent by a nod of his head in the direction of the voice

He moved towards the assembly hall along with the Kaurava warriors As he climbed the steps of the palace, he paused at the one-hundred-and-fifth step Only one more step remained to climb Gazing at my severed ear-lobes, and smiling, he placed his foot on the last, hundred-and-sixth step Had I the power, I would have demolished the whole staircase and made a monument of it—a monument to Shon

The first thing Sri Krishna did as he entered the royal assembly hall was bow his head in respect in front of the ancient throne Glancing at the royal solar gold-cast insignia of the Kauravas, he gracefully sat down on the seat indicated by the chief minister Vrishavarman All sat down according to protocol Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandhari Devi were ensconced on the throne This was a most momentous, and might very likely prove to be the last, royal assembly The hall was spilling over with warriors eager to have a darshan of Sri Krishna I sat down, and gazed at my feet Why were they so tapering—I had not been able to explain this at all in the course of my eventful life

The chief minister Vrishavarman announced the reason for calling the assembly, and on behalf of the Kauravas graciously welcomed Sri Krishna "And now Bhagavan Sri Krishna, Raja of the Yadavas, will explain the reason for his presence here I hope the Kauravas will give serious thought to what he says This is an important, a critical occasion "

Adjusting his shawl, Sri Krishna rose, as he did so, the vermilion powder gathered in the folds of his shawl fell on his feet He spoke

in a sharp, piercing tone, his thin lips trembled, his keen eyes surveyed the audience

"Karna, Bhishma, Raja Dhritarashtra, Drona, Kripa, Vidura, Ashvatthaman, Shakuni, Jayadratha, Duhshasana and Duryodhana! All assembled Kaurava warriors! I have not come here as the Raja of the Yadavas, nor as the maternal cousin of the Pandavas Nor even as Sri Krishna I am one who believes in justice, and I am here to plead for justice from this ancient throne, because this throne is famed throughout Aryavarta for its dispensation of justice You Kauravas whose symbol is the Sun God, are you ready to dispense justice to the Pandavas? I have not come here with a proposal for reconciliation, I am here to present a truth that will strike like lightning You have tested and stretched the tolerance powers of the Pandavas to breaking point Where in the manuals of warfare did you learn the device of burning alive the Pandavas and the Queen Mother Kunti in the lacquer house? Will Prince Duryodhana answer this? Uncle Shakuni gave the marvellous kingdom of the Khandava forest to the fatherless and shelterless Pandavas—a kingdom filled with thorny creepers and trees and reverberating with the roars of wild beasts, is he prepared to leave the capital of his own kingdom of Gandhara and establish a new city in the forest of Dandakaranya? Let's say I stake my kingdom of Dvarika in a gambling match, is he prepared to stake his kingdom of Gandhara and throw dice with me? And let's say he stakes and loses his wife—is he prepared to grant me permission to drag her in front of all the assembled audience in this sabha? Is he prepared to spend thirteen agonising years barefoot in forest exile? All the Kaurava warriors rushed out of this city in order to steal the cows of Viratnagara, by the same argument, will you tolerate the entry into your city of all the Yadava warriors of Mathura and Dvarika, along with the Pandavas, if they do so without advance information? In each of you there is a streak of eternal conscience With that as your witness tell me—what kind of justice have you meted out to the Pandavas? What is justice—are you even aware of the meaning of that word?

"Yet, I consider you and the Pandavas as one So burning to ashes all memories of past cruel deeds, I say this 'Raja Dhritarashtra, return half the kingdom that rightfully belongs to the Pandavas, and extinguish this massive conflagration that threatens to engulf our whole future Tell me are you ready to provide this justice?'"

His words fell like whiplashes, and an eerie silence prevailed in the assembly The Maharaja did not rise to reply No one stirred

"Tell me—any one of you, tell me, what is your final decision?" He looked around at each one, asking this question His tone had an added sharpness

"*I will tell you Let me tell* you in plain language the final decision of the Kaurava warriors who have been stunned by your eloquence The Pandavas are not going to get half the kingdom " Duryodhana sprang up from his seat, knit his brows, and said this, shaking his short, stubby fingers

"Why?"

"They have no rights Even if they were Maharaja Pandu's sons, they would have no rights Division of the kingdom will lead inevitably to a hundred fragments tomorrow and a thousand the day after What do the Pandavas think?—Is the kingdom a custard-apple for ten ashram-dwellers to share among themselves?"

"Very well, if you don't wish to part with half the kingdom, so be it But will you at least return to the Pandavas their city of Indraprastha in the Khandava forest which they established and made prosperous? Don't insult truth and injustice with prejudice and pre-judgment "

"No They lost that kingdom in gambling They'll never get it back " Duryodhana spoke as if he was wielding a mace Sparks seemed to fly right and left, inviting a cosmic doomsday

"*Are you ready to give even five villages, one for each brother,* from this huge kingdom of Hastinapura, for the shelter of the Pandavas?" Sri Krishna lifted his hand and showed all five fingers to Duryodhana The hearts of the warriors in the sabha melted, as it were They whispered to each other Putting a stop to everything, Duryodhana repeated, "No! No! No! Three times no! No then, no now, no later! Forget five villages—the Pandavas will not, without fighting, get so much as a particle of dust on the tip of a needle! Not just that—to make sure that the Pandavas don't enjoy even the dust that your feet will take back with you, I would have arranged to have them shaken free of all dust, but but, listen, deceitful and rascally Krishna, you who are miscalled Bhagavan, I don't want to sully the hands of my servants by having them touch your feet Go! Wrap up the shreds of your peace proposal in your yellow robe, and get out of Hastinapura this very instant! Or else "

"Duryodhana!" Sri Krishna's lips quivered. His eyes became red. The entire assembly, forgetting their earlier welcome, began laughing at him. Many rose in their seats as if hit by a bolt of lightning. My ears became numb, my eyes closed. Bringing his mouth close to my ears, Duryodhana said slowly, with great relish, 'Karna, I'll kill this milkman today—the root of all our problems. It is fitting that this milkman born in a Mathura jail should rot in a Kaurava prison where he can recall all the welcome he's received from us to his heart's content." His words entered my ears like molten iron. They pierced my head like poisonous snakes. Protesting openly for the first time, I shouted at him, "Duryodhana, have you taken leave of your senses? Do you realise who you are planning to kill?"

"Karna, tell him to get whatever weapons he has in his kingdom and use them to kill me—if he can." Sri Krishna closed his large eyes. For an instant I was stunned. I felt as if every part of his body was bubbling like boiling milk. Suddenly the lovely plume on his crown touched the ceiling of the assembly hall. His body which had assumed this massive shape was again drenched with a divine radiance. That radiance, more powerful than a hurricane, circled his entire body from toe to head at a furious speed. I was afraid that the intensity of the radiance shooting from his body might melt even the hard stone pillars of the hall. All the Kaurava warriors, rishis and hermits, servants and maids floundered in fear in front of his gigantic shape. Being skin-armour-less, I also experienced the fierce heat. Even the words that emanated from that globular, jar-shaped countenance seemed to be afire. They scorched the ceiling itself.

I heard Sri Krishna's words as I regained consciousness. "War! War will not solve anyone's problems. War has been devised as a desperate and harsh way of extirpating the roots of human cruelty. War does not in any way promote human welfare, because it is not the ultimate end of life. The ultimate goal of life is illumination, illumination through knowledge, through science, through the atman. If you seek that illumination through the doom of war, I am more than ready to initiate a horrifying holocaust. I will deprive your grand bodies of the spark of life and mix them with the same earth from which you took birth and whose fertility has sustained you so long. And this holocaust will keep on proclaiming to the whole world generation after generation the story of your

pride, misdirection, deceit, cruelty, revenge and all other devilish traits. Be warned, therefore—though it is true that in this war I will not personally wield any weapons, take it from me that I will reduce your lumbering, arrogant, intoxicated bodies into dust."

All kept silent, as if they had become speechless. Only Maharaja Dhritarashtra, perhaps because he was sightless, seemed not to be aware of all that was going on in the assembly hall. Rising from his throne, he said fearfully, "Raja of the Yadavas, please dine with us in the palace tonight." The assembly heard him, and did not know whether to laugh or commiserate with the blind Maharaja.

"Raja, I am planning to dine in Hastinapura tonight—not in your palace which makes a mockery of justice, but in the thatched hut of Vidura, from the hands of Queen Mother Kunti." He rose from his seat, and moved out of the assembly hall with the same easy grace with which he entered it. Grandsire Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and Ashvatthaman followed him to the main entrance of the palace to wish him farewell. They were frightened and apprehensive.

Who was this Sri Krishna? A cowherd? A warrior? The Raja of the Yadavas? The Pandavas' maternal cousin? Or, as Duryodhana thought, a spell-weaving black-magic tantrik? Hordes of questions crowded my mind.

Oh, Sri Krishna was certainly out of the ordinary, he was a spark of the divine. The straight-hitting arrows of my thoughts were pulverising the heads of all my doubts.

I rose also, with the others, to see him off at the main entrance. He paused briefly at the threshold. Turning around, he *pranama ed* everyone. I also folded my palms. What should not have happened, had happened, and something more was still to happen.

"Karna, come." He beckoned me towards him with a movement of his right hand. He held my hand in his. An inexplicable poignant thrill raced through me at the divine touch. Why had he called me only? Why did he open his speech in the assembly hall by addressing me first? It was beyond me.

Holding my hand in his, and instructing Daruka to sit at the back, with the other hand he jerked at the horses' reins. Without once looking back, he urged the horses forward. In the back of the chariot were seated Yuyudhana, Brahmagargya and Daruka. My

mind was a welter of confused thoughts Ignoring all the others, why had he held only *my* hand and seated me in his chariot? Why did Sri Krishna, never one to hold another's hand, select mine of all people? My thoughts raced in consonance with the speeding chariot From the dense bough of a mango tree, a kokila singing merrily in all the seven notes, wheeled over our chariot and vanished in the western sky As I saw it disappear, I got a glimpse of the setting sun *I missed the evening* arghya-*offering*, I said to myself On both sides, kadamba, *ashoka*, mango, peepal and many other varieties of trees sped behind us like swift arrows Our chariot eagerly shot ahead out of the city precincts My life's chariot also was speeding along in his company on the royal road of fame, with my hand placed in Sri Krishna's pink, soft hand Fluttering in the wind, his yellow robe flapped against my thigh Whenever the chariot swerved, his blue-skinned body pressed against mine

Pulling at the reins, he reduced the speed of the chariot near a large banyan as soon as Vidura's thatched hut came into view We had arrived much earlier than planned at the city limits In front of us, the thousands-of-years-old-generous-flowing waters of the Ganga gleamed softly in the light of the departing sun A flock of *garuda* birds sailed high across the sky, returning to their habitation on the Mainaka hill Immediately I was reminded of Shon He had asked me once, "Bhaiya, will you fly high and still higher like the *garuda*-bird?" Shon was no more There remained only heart-stirring memories of him The reins were pulled taut The chariot stopped My thoughts stopped too We had crossed the city limits

"Come, Karna," he said, indicating the thick shade of a banyan Leaving the chariot casually where it stood, he took my hand in his and guided me to the shady spot under the banyan Dusting his yellow robe, the young energetic leader of the Yadavas sat down on a black stone Though there was space next to him on the slab, I sat near his feet

In the kingdom of Kalinga, on the Mahendra mountain, I had placed Bhagavan Parashurama's head on my lap under an almost identical banyan—I recalled that incident vividly Today my hand reposed in Sri Krishna's hand The same banyan was above my head Sri Krishna's blue complexion shone in the slanting golden rays of the setting sun The necklaces on his chest—of yellow sapphire, ruby, pearl, cat's-eye—moved up and down with the

rhythm of his breathing The golden crown on his head gleamed with reflected light From the patch of thick grass where I sat, I noticed a dirty little vermilion-coated insect scuttling up his yellow robe

"Karna, I have brought you away from all the others in the city because I want to tell you a profound truth which will hurt you bitterly Look at the setting sun and listen to me attentively " He said this with great affection, as he pointed to the sun sinking between two hills, his voice as sweet as the lilt of a flute

"I am listening, Raja of the Yadavas The earth itself can go out of orbit, I cannot be hurt by anything any more," I said, looking at his pointed nose

"Karna Karna, you are not the son of a charioteer You are not the son of Radha and Adhiratha " He gazed right through my eyes and put the lake of my mind in utter turmoil Instantly I stood up and screamed, "What rubbish you're saying! I—not a charioteer's son? Not Radha-mata's son! No! It's a lie, Raja of the Yādavas! A lie! Better you had wielded your deadly discus than this sabre of your tongue!"

"What I am saying is the truth You are a Kshatriya by birth so divine that it excels all Kshatriyas You you are the first-born of the Queen Mother Kunti Devi's sons I am not doing anything wrong in telling you the truth about your birth Look steadily to the west You are the illustrious son of the golden-wombed Sun-God himself " He pointed at the western horizon My blood coursed swiftly through my body as I listened to him Joy, pride, self-confidence—I experienced them all—my heart-gates burst, and tears streamed from the corners of my eyes

I wanted to shout, "I am the Sun-God's son! I am the Sun-God's son!" and rush around dancing in joy I wanted to roar out "I am the Sun-God's son!" in front of all those who had all these years heartlessly crushed the vesture of my life in social conventions and flung it in the dust of crass selfishness "I am the Sun-God's son! I am the son of Pure Energy! I am not unworthy! I am not contemptible!"

"Karna, you are not Radha's son, you are Kunti's son You are therefore the eldest brother of the Pandavas " Getting up from the stone slab, Sri Krishna placed a hand on my shoulder Unlike his words, his touch was soothing

"Sri Krishna, I fail to understand what is truth, and what untruth If I am Kunti's son, why am I so removed from her? If I am a Pandava, why am I separate from the Pandavas? If I am the Sun-God's son, why am I groping in the kingdom of darkness?"

"It's a long story A story so touching that it will melt the stoniest of hard-hearted men A story of the cruelty of social conventions A story of a mother's silent sorrow

"You were born to unwed Kunti by the Sun-God Surya as a result of the divine mantra of Rishi Durvasas which he gave to Kunti She was in the kingdom of Bhojpura at that time For an unmarried princess to give birth to a son was in the eyes of society an indelible stigma She could have no status, no life anywhere with you The world would not have allowed it If she could not survive, what standing had you? So, placing a Himalayan stone on her heart, that great lady floated you away on the Ashva river, the very day you were born You floated in a basket from the Ashva down to the Charmanvati river, then to the Yamuna and finally to the Ganga, and so you travelled all the way till you were discovered on a grey dawn by Adhiratha From then till this day you grew up as a charioteer Because you had no inkling of your divine antecedents, you got trapped in the chakra of misfortune Karna Karna, you are not a charioteer Don't side with unjust Duryodhana

"No one in the world has received what you have—three fathers and three mothers You have the fatherly protection of the Sun-God Surya-deva, Maharaja Pandu and Adhiratha Kunti Devi, Radha and Ganga yearn with motherly love for you Karna, today is the turning point in your life Your family is the highest, your lineage is divine, the Pandavas are your own brothers, you are the first Pandava, the eldest son of Kunti "

Each word dashed like a towering wave of emotion on the shores of my mind In an instant my whole life from the day I arrived in Hastinapura from Champanagari till today whirled across my eyes—like the Sudarshana-chakra circling in the right hand of Sri Krishna in his cosmic multi-revelation form The sharp teeth of countless events bit into my heart Inspite of the fact that I was the son of the Sun God himself, had I experienced in my long life anything except insult, indifference, neglect, and indignity? What had I been—and what was I now? What was life all about? Did life mean that one person did the wrong—and another was

punished terribly for it? Though I was the Sun-God's own son, how many slaps and blows had I not had to *endure*? Could it be that life had surrounded my golden head with flames to make sure I would never forget I was born in a womb of fire?

Son of a charioteer? No, *son of the Sun-God*! Son of Radha? No, son of Kunti The one-hundred and-first Kaurava? No, the first Pandava I myself couldn't make out who I was, where I came from, where I was heading Because Sri Krishna was saying it, I had to accept it as true, otherwise

"Karna, by unknowingly always taking the side of the Kauravas you have allowed *your life to be wasted away*—wasted away for no reason at all You've always opposed the Pandavas You have hated your own brothers Now that you know the truth, are you going to carry on in the same way? Remember growth and prosperity are the goals of life Till today you have been in chains Your fame's been extraordinary, but your mind's just stagnated I—I, *your maternal cousin, am calling you Come with me, return* to your home Return to your own blood, to the Pandavas, to your brothers and friends " He said this with his finger pointed towards Upaplavya

Listening to him, I simply could not fathom why cruel Kala had *planted the mango tree of my life in thorny and rocky soil* I was utterly restless Should I betray the Kauravas in their hour of crisis? Should I stab in the back Duryodhana who had in a single night transported my life-lotus from the swamp of my charioteer-existence to the royal throne, and defect to the Pandavas? Should I spurn Radha-mata who had given more importance to my joys and sorrows than those of her own son, and run to the embrace of Kunti Devi? No, no, I am not Kunti's son, I am Radha's son No, I am not the son of the Sun God, I am the son of a charioteer My life is what my samskaras have made *it What fate has shown is my life's direction*

"Karna, don't brood too much Come with me in my chariot and let's go to Upaplavya According to the Dharma shastras, you are the illegitimate son of Maharaja Pandu, the eldest of the Pandavas By associating with Brahmins learned in the Vedas, you have gained much knowledge of Dharma Through brahmacharya, *arghya*-offerings, self-control, *giving charities and other* ways you have reached the highest level of attainment Each *Pandava* excels in a particular field *But you are expert* in all fields The title that

does you real credit is that of 'eldest Pandava' Come, Karna, it's still not too late to take the right path Listen to me

"Come, return to your mother Kunti, who has been grieving all her life Return to your brothers who have deep love for you Because they are your brothers, the Pandavas will anoint you king of this entire kingdom Pure-white feather-whisk in hand, Yudhishthira will humbly fan you with it He will get into a chariot only after you do, as your attendant And powerful Bhima will respectfully hold the umbrella above your head Your own brother, bow-expert Arjuna, whom you have unknowingly treated so long as your enemy, will be your charioteer Nakula, Sahadeva, the five sons of Draupadi, Dhrishtadyumna—all of them will unquestioningly follow your every instruction They will meekly obey your straight, lightning-like words

"Not just this—even I, with all the warriors of the Vrishni and Andhaka clans, will become your follower Uddhava, Balarama, Satyaki, Ugrasena and others will respetfully bow before you as the Raja of the Pandavas My sons—Pradyumna, Charudeshna, Sudeshna, Chitragu, Bhanusana will consider themselves fortunate in getting a chance to serve you Heroic Abhimanyu will not ride his chariot without first touching your feet And fragrant-bodied, dark-skinned Draupadi will accept you as her husband and massage your feet with sandalwood paste Come, the heart of the lady who gave you birth has suffered and pined for seventy years—her heart will be soothed only when two tear drops fall from your eyes on her aged feet and gratitude overwhelms her Your fame as Raja Vasushena will be drummed not only all over Aryavarta but in all the directions of the three worlds Early mornings will resound with praise from the mouths of generation after generation of Aryans honouring you as the Emperor of Emperors

"Or else—or else memories of you will eat into the minds of crores and crores of Aryans for lakhs and lakhs of years as a person who sided with the unjust Kauravas and pushed the whole of Aryavarta into the abyss of war out of naked self interest, as a person who, embracing false ideals to his heart, not only destroyed himself but also sparked off the doom of others, as a person who, in spite of being the son of radiance, chose to obscure himself in darkness Come with me into the chariot "

He pulled me towards the chariot Without hesitation I dug my heels into the ground and insisted, "No, Krishna It is of no importance to me who is remembered how I do know, however, that I will never forget what's happened today Krishna, my hand reposes in your gentle grasp The fact that I am the son of the Sun-God makes my hand shake I do not consider anything more fortunate than knowledge of this fact You tell me, what should I do—should I, as the son of Surya and as the eldest son of Kunti, follow the principles of that divine family, or should I go off-course, take the wrong road? Does a ray of the sun ever change its path? The course it once takes, it sticks to that for ever Kingdom, wealth, fame, bonds of love—none of these nooses can deflect the sun-ray If you give me the kingdom, I will place it at Duryodhana's feet If the Pandavas become my followers, I will turn them over as attendants in the assembly hall of Raja Duryodhana Karna and the Pandavas— it is possible for their lifelines to mesh in this life, but the lines of Karna and Duryodhana have been united from previous births Tell me, have the cowherds placed at your feet all the blossomed flowers of a single branch? As a recipient of the pure affection of Duryodhana for me, I have enjoyed for years the princely pleasures as vast as the ocean—how can you expect me to push Duryodhana inside the deep pit of betrayal, and side with the Pandavas out of sheer self-interest and love? Will this add lustre to the son of the Sun-God? Though the daughter of a mere charioteer, Vrishali has been my life-companion with fragrant feeling and concern—more than Draupadi can ever be—and you expect me to discard her for the scented beauty of Draupadi? Will this bring honour to the son of Kunti? I was a child and even as she used to clean my bottom she would whisper 'Vasu, Vasu' and lovingly smell my head—how can I push aside that Radha-mata and embrace in her place the delirious Mata Kunti-devi, who gave me only the gift of birth and, even before my umbilical cord was cut, cast me adrift on the roaring waves of the Ashva River? No, Krishna, it's not possible The fact is that I will gladly accept outright death but I will not accept this kind of horrible extinction of my very existence

"What really surprises me is the strange meeting that has taken place today You were born a Kshatriya and reared unfortunately in a cow-shed of Gokula Yashoda-mata brought you up I also was born—of a divine origin—and unfortunately I was brought up

in a stable in Champanagari Radha-mata brought me up. Because it was your duty, you had a fist-fight with your maternal uncle Kansa Because it is my duty, I will have to fight with my own brothers But but "

"But—but what, Karna? Speak out plainly," he said, looking deep into my eyes

"Krishna, you have left Yashoda-mata, but I cannot leave Radha-mata Never You have forgotten the cowherds of Gokula, but I will never forget the charioteers of Champanagari The crores and crores of people of Aryavarta are not going to remember bitterly generation after generation a Karna who pushed Aryavarta to the brink of war, a Karna who out of personal hate destroyed others, a Karna who was the son of radiance but ended his life in a whirlpool of darkness If they remember at all, they will remember you with bitterness What kind of justice have you brought for me? Surely you are not denying the fact that you are upset with the gambling session of the Pandavas which led to their twelve-year exile with one year more spent incognito? But—but do you have the least feelings of sympathy in your justice-loving heart for the horrendous, despicable incognito sufferings which I have had to experience without even taking part in a gambling match? If you had any feelings at all, you would never have asked me to come over to the side of the Pandavas Krishna, though you are here as a political emissary, you are stirring my emotions This is bitter, Krishna, but it is true I say this frankly, and so I hope *you will forgive me out of the largeness of your heart You are* mighty, you are divine In the depths of my heart there is for you a love and respect beyond words That is why I will fearlessly and joyfully offer the golden tribute of my body in the maha-*yajna* that you are igniting This divine maha-*yajna* will be one the likes of which has not happened before and is not likely to happen ever again Purushottama, the time for the Pandavas and Karna to unite has long since passed

"Go, Krishna I know that you are the officiating priest of this great *yajna* The performing priest is ape-bannered Arjuna The valour of the soldiers is the ghee poured in the sacrifice The Brahma, Indra, Varuna, Agni, and Shiva missiles are fired to the chanting of mantras—these mantras are the maha-mantras of the *yajna* The sacrificial ladle is Arjuna's Gandiva bow with its indestructible arrows, and the lion-roars with which his son

Abhimanyu inspires the soldiers are the Sama-chantings of the *yajna*. Bhima with the sky-shattering scream is the *udgata*-priest; dharma-abiding Yudhishthira is *Brahma*; Nakula, Sahadeva, Shamitra and valiant Satyaki of the Yadava clan are the attendant priests. The hubbub of the war-drums, the sky-rending peals of conches, and the lion-roars of warriors are the sacred shlokas chanted during the sacrifice. The flagpoles, the chariot-axles, and the seats atop of elephants are the stakes to which the sacrificial beasts are tied. Maces, swords, arrows, tridents, spears, shields are the sacred *kusha* grass. Raja Duryodhana has treated his Kaurava army as his wife, and with her he has taken initiation into this divine maha-*yajna*....

"And—and I will smilingly offer my golden body as a golden offering in this maha-*yajna*. This maha-*yajna* will have no equal in past or future. Krishna, the course of my life has brought me to such a state that I have to refuse even you. Which is why the heart of this cousin of yours is slowly breaking into pieces. Go, Raja of the Yadavas. If you can, do forgive unfortunate Karna. The life-lines of the Pandavas and my lifeline are completely separate. Very definitely they will now destroy each other. Even the central figure of Kunti-mata cannot now unite them....

"Krishna, fruits are filled with juice; inside are seeds. The juice destroys itself to nourish the seed. I am like that juice. Perhaps it is fated that from my self-sacrifice the seeds of the Pandavas will sprout and flower.

"Go, Krishna. The time of uniting with the Pandavas has passed away like the flowing water of the Ashva River. Now, it's Karna or the Pandavas. This future is inevitable. I have long ago gone beyond the merciless frightening curtain of death. Son of a charioteer, Raja of Anga, hero of charities, world-conqueror, bow-expert Karna—I will not fight in any of these roles. I will fight like a brilliant ray of sunshine piercing the realm of darkness. My father the Sun-God, my mother Kunti-devi, my maternal cousin Sri Krishna, my brothers the Pandavas—in accordance with all these relationships—as brave Karna.

"Krishna, the Karna who gave away his flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour to Indra will pierce in war the hands, legs and armours of the soldiers. The Karna who all his life offered *arghya* to the Sun-God will now kill soldiers on the battlefield. The Karna who all his life washed the feet of Radha-mata will now wash the feet of this

sacred land of Aryavarta with the blood of heroes Karna, himself accursed, will today offer the gift of heaven to all Karna, himself unhonoured, will on the battlefield honour all the others Go, leader of the Yadavas, and with a calm mind prepare for the great sacrifice I have one more prayer—never reveal to the Pandavas that I am their eldest brother, or they will refuse to fight against me Go, my friend, the royal jewel of Karna can never be fitted in the crown of the Pandavas Explain this to them in your sweet voice And accept this last homage of the son of a charioteer with a large and noble grace Krishna, I have nothing left to give you except this last homage "

I stooped to touch his feet Two tear drops slipped from my eyes, fell on his clean feet, then rolled down and mingled in the dust

"Victory to Karna, Radha's son!" He lifted me by my shoulders and embraced me warmly A flow of grateful tears streamed from my eyes on his beautiful blue-complexioned back When his tears wet my head, I felt I had achieved the victorious consummation of my life I would never again experience such an epiphany of good fortune, glory, and auspiciousness

Gently releasing his hand from mine, and glancing towards the western skyline, he slowly climbed into his chariot, and stood on the front driver's seat with the reins in his hands He lifted his whip to urge the white horses This was my last meeting with him I wanted to place before him the last poignant sorrow lying in the store-room of my heart I wanted to be free of everything, like the wind, like the rays of the sun

"Wait, Sri Krishna!" I raised my hand and called out He gazed at me in astonishment, whip hand transfixed in mid-air Running to him and placing my hand on the chariot, I said slowly, "I have never asked you for anything Today I have a request Will you do one thing for me? Only you can do it "

"Tell me what you want, Radha's son," he said, with raised eyebrows

"Sri Krishna, tell large-eyed, dark-complexioned, and body-fragrant Draupadi that one broken string in the veena of Karna's innermost self has always twanged with a bitter resonance as a result of her disdain But ask that five-husbanded lady who has nevertheless attained the highest peak of devoted wifehood—ask Draupadi, if she can, to forgive Karna '

Lifting the reins, he manoeuvred the chariot towards the direction of Vidura's thatched hut I could see clearly the puffs of dust raised by the whirring wheels In a little while the dust settled down, but my mind's whirring thoughts could not be stilled Turning my back on the thatched hut which housed the Queen Mother, I walked towards the palace She was the Raj-mata, she only gave me birth, in the palace was Radha-mata—who made me into whatever I was, who really created me

12

Sri Krishna left, kicking the royal goblet of my life, spilling all over the sweet milk of my future hopes The only consolation was that his holy feet had touched the goblet He it was who gave me the truth about my birth

Exposing the secret of my life, he left in his chariot with a grace as casual as the one with which he might accompany the cowherds of Gokula driving their cattle to graze on the foothills of Govardhana But I had become totally disturbed and upset He had come as a political emissary I refused his advice, thinking that I should not get tempted by his bait But—but I was human too, after all But how could such a colossal deception leave me in peace? What was my fault that I was brought up as a lost wild tiger among cattle? I was the son of the Sun-God, yet I had to endure with bowed head so many heart-rending insults from lakhs and lakhs of people All my life I had to run blindly with my mind aflame like a lit torch Wasn't my life like the sweet water of the Himalaya-born Ganga which becomes saline as soon as it reaches the ocean? What was the need now of the magnitude of the Himalayas? What would I gain now by thinking, *I am divinely born, my background is the finest, my ancestors were illustrious and honourable*— however true all this might be Were I to stand today on the main thoroughfare of Hastinapura and scream, *I am a Kshatriya too, I am not low-born, I am not mean, not despicable,* would anyone believe me? Who was responsible for this malicious twist in my life? Where was the person to whom I could lay bare the frustrations of my life? Who was I fighting for? How far could I go, espousing a lie and mocking the future? The old was all broken and scattered, the new was out of reach Gushing from rugged rocks, had the Ashva River of my life reached complete stagnation

after encountering the battering confusions of the Nishadha mountain? What was there left now to experience except death?

At a time when I had to face hill-huge problems with lion-like courage and stand stable, exactly then I was torn by conflicting thoughts. Not one option was available that would calm the turbulence of my mind. On all four sides only the deep pits of vain thoughts—the same old things, which now appeared repulsive to me, and which emasculated my selfhood. They were impractical, without any shakti, devoid of dignity, ignorant of the atman, even destructive of the atman. These thoughts included Draupadi's supreme insult, the hatred of the Pandavas, my vow to kill Arjuna What was I to do? Where was I to go?

I stared at the hill on the western horizon and thought· *At least my father the Sun-God, who has been filling the universe with light for crores and crores of years, will provide me with fortitude and consolation.* His warm sunrays, which embraced Hastinapura, spoke clearly to me: "Karna, don't lose hope Can a diamond, even if lying in the dust, give off rays of darkness? My radiance that is lying latent in your body will flood the world one day You will walk with pride, as the leader of all And even Sri Krishna will bow before you Just keep one thing in mind—cast off your doubts and confusions, throw away your ambivalence, become single-minded There is only one way Fight as a Kaurava "

My mind had calmed down by the time I hurried back to the palace *I am the Sun-God's* son—this fact alone made me horripilate Dusk was falling, and the chirping of crickets could be heard in the thick clusters of trees on both sides But their shrill cries did not upset my mind Leave aside crickets—even if the entire world turned against me, I would not fear

With each step I took, the meaning of the basic events of my life became clear to me why, for instance, did my body heat up on so many occasions, why was I instinctively drawn to the performance of *arghya*-offerings, why did I possess flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, why was my entire body golden-complexioned I had learnt from Krishna the reasons behind these mysteries Why did Yudhishthira stare so intently at my feet, who was depicted in the intriguing mural on the palace wall of Indraprastha, why did the Queen Mother Kunti Devi send presents at my wedding—now the deeper meaning of these events was beginning to show Still, my mind did not shudder any more at the enormity of the fraud that

life had practised on me I was not agitated any more Now that I knew that I was the son of the Sun-God, I was confident that I could even grind Death under my feet and stand on its head Now there was no perplexity, no not-knowing-what-to-do, no doubts There was only one clear road, one direction—to take part in the great war

As soon as I entered the palace, I called out "Shon!" as was my practice He was not in Had he been present, I would have told him, "Because they came between us, I gave away my flesh-earrings and skin-armour a long time ago, and now I have broken my familial relationship and become truly a son of a charioteer I am a charioteer's son, I am the Sun-God's son, I am a Kaurava, but but I am not a Pandava I am Karna, but not the son of Kunti "

Hearing me call out for Shon, Vrishali quickly entered the room and asked lovingly, "What do you need?"

"Nothing " There was nothing I needed from anyone any more My heart was bubbling and overflowing with satisfaction, gratitude and a feeling of blessedness I felt purified, as if washed in that rain-experience There was only one problem—not one word of that incident could be told to Radha mata, Vrishali, Supriya, and my sons There are some extraordinary ecstatic moments in life of which we cannot supply even an inkling even to loved ones who matter so much to us

"Vrishali, I will eat my heart's fill of sweets today Not sweets made by you, but made by Radha mata " She looked surprised and asked, "Why? What makes you so happy today?"

"Tell me, if your son Sudamana were suddenly to appear alive and well in front of you, would you not be happy? That's the kind of happiness I'm feeling now Don't ask me why I can't tell you the cause of my happiness—just as you could never explain to Princess Duhshala Devi when she put you that question about me, remember?" I said to her as I looked out of the window at the full moon up in the sky The waters of *Ganga mata* gleamed in the moon's loving light I wondered how infinitely long the moon had shone in this way and how long it would continue shining like this, but no answer was forthcoming

Vrishali left to get the sweets prepared Before doing so, she personally poured the *ingudi* oil in the stone lamps and lit them Hadn't she lit the love-lamps in my life exactly like this? Wouldn't the heart of this sweet and simple girl have broken at the feeling of

her own inferiority if I had taken her in my arms and announced that I was the Sun-God's son? She loved a charioteer's son, not the Sun God's son Sometimes, in a crucial situation, silence is best

Having had my fill of the feast, and sliding into my mouth the pan given by Supriya, my body and mind felt so relaxed, so light The mystery surrounding my life had been cleared Vrishali had the shawl, which was witness to so many sweet memories I asked her to give it to me, wrapping it round my body, I stepped out of the palace for a stroll in the moonlight I could hear clearly the peals signalling the first watch of the night sounded by the night guard striking the steel plate with his wooden baton Sprawling Hastinapura relaxed in the moonlight In the elephant stables, an elephant was knocking his tusks against the wooden pillars, occasionally horses neighed, and cows jerked their heads, irritated by insects crawling up their necks, their bells jingling confusedly—apart from these, there were no other sounds

I reached the spot where Shon had dashed forward and rescued the kitten from sure death under the wheels of the Queen Mother Kunti Devi's speeding chariot There was no Shon today, no kitten, and Duryodhana had destroyed even the chariot There were only the two of us the Queen Mother and I She was probably sitting inside Vidura's thatched hut, discussing her joys and sorrows with Sri Krishna Living with cowherds, Sri Krishna had developed a special taste for rice, and he must have asked his aunt to prepare a rice meal for him, which Vidura ji no doubt would serve enthusiastically All the scenes appeared vividly in front of my eyes But Shon, who should have heard about all this, was no more I missed his absence so intensely that I felt unwell

I proceeded on the main road The *ashoka*, mango, sal, pipal and other trees had blocked the moonlight, and made the earth under them even more curious to see the moon An intricate, artistic chiaroscuro had been created by stray moonrays that trickled through the leaves I was suddenly reminded of the day when I returned as world conqueror to a shower of loving welcome by the citizens, but I wasn t overly impressed by this memory nor was there a likelihood of my being very impressed Fame, accomplishment, glory—these passing bubbles no longer held any fascination for me I approached the military stadium From the entrance I could see the platform inside from where, raising my hand, I had accepted the Sun-God as my guru Near this platform

a snake-like bitterness between Arjuna and me had begun. Near this platform one night I had pierced with an arrow the eye of the stuffed bird which Shon had caught during the day and hung on the tree.

I crossed the city limits, reaching the magnificent sports stadium which Guru Drona had ordered constructed for the competitions. A brief pause there brought back all the sharp memories of the competitions: the arenas where so many weapons were wielded... the impatient wait outside the entrance...the applause of the spectators...the piercing of the target by Arjuna...the handclapping...Shon's frantic words...the *patraratha* bird on the *tamal* tree...the blue-lotus garland crushed underfoot...the feelingless hollow sky echoing the insults hurled at the charioteer's son. All appeared in such clarity before me. But they had no power to influence me any more. My mind's courtyard was no longer blank to receive the *alpana*-designs of such events. It was now filled with thoughts of terrifying, total war.

I reached the bank of the Ganga at midnight. The moon in the sky was directly atop my head. A black spot appeared on the face of the sky-moon when it saw the reflected Ganga-moon. Greyish clouds sporadically surrounded it.

I seated myself on a large stone slab. Untying the silver amulet around my arm given me by Radha-mata, I slowly slid it in the water. Bobbing on the waves, the amulet floated away into the distance, beyond sight, wanting to ask the Ganga, "Tell me, are the waves of the Ganga more in number than the significant events that I have witnessed in the life of my master?"

Lifting my hand and bidding farewell to the amulet, I returned to the palace. With a serene mind, I went off to sleep in the ancient room of the kings of the solar dynasty.

13

Dawn broke with the trumpeting of elephants. Looking out of the window, I could see the camps of massive armies of various lands on all four sides. I was struck by the preparedness of Duryodhana. He had sent urgent messages to his emissaries who were searching for the Pandavas and they had skilfully persuaded the armies to come over to Duryodhana's side.

Magadha, Madra, Chedi, Avanti, Kulinda, Sindha, Kalinga and other kingdoms' flags surrounded Hastinapura. The flag of Dvarika was nowhere visible among them. Duryodhana probably had no idea of the importance of the Yadavas. Hoping to dispel his lack of knowledge by sending him immediately to Dvarika, I hurried out of the palace exactly as I was

The minister, Grandsire Bhishma, Uncle Sanjaya, Duhshasana, Uncle Shakuni, Jayadratha—all of them were intent on their work Duryodhana had sentimentally impressed on them the fact that they were living off the kindness of the Kurus. Inspired by political fervour, those mighty warriors were looking after their different regiments, without any shirking No one appeared in any way afraid

"Duryodhana, why did you forget the Yadavas at the time you were preparing for the great war?" I asked Duryodhana, while he was finalising with Duhshasana the food-arrangements for the armies

"No, Karna I will on no account go to meet Sri Krishna," he said, standing up stiffly

"It's no more a question of what *you* would like to do It's something that concerns the huge armies that have encamped around Hastinapura You will have to proceed to Dvarika, not as Duryodhana but as the man conducting the war "

"Karna, this "

"This that I'm not going to listen to one more word from you If you need me in this war—then you must go to Dvarika and persuade Sri Krishna over to your side Remember, you have to bring Sri Krishna, not his seven-*akshauhini*-strong army, to your side "

"Karna, you still have fond hopes of seeing Sri Krishna on our side," he said, creasing his brow

"Yes, but only if you abase yourself before him, if you beg his forgiveness Only then " I had full faith in Sri Krishna's largeness of heart

"Impossible He will just not come—I don't want you to have any false hopes I'm sure that even if I place my head at his feet, he will not come And I am not the type to go about ever laying my head at anyone's feet "

"In that case in that case, at least do this—persuade him to remain neutral And not to leave Dvarika " That was the only way out

"Whatever you say I'll follow your advice and go to Dvarika I'll make an effort to convince Sri Krishna to join us You, Grandsire Bhishma, Ashvatthaman, and others stay here and prepare the field for battle Consult the Grandsire and finalise the rules of combat Weapons, chariots, coats-of-mail flags, war trumpets and kettledrums—keep them ready for battle Every day, without fail, carefully provide the gathered soldiers with money, food and soma rasa '

He ordered his charioteer Pratikaman to ready the chariot for Dvarika I breathed a sigh of relief It would suffice if he could manage to keep Sri Krishna neutral The Pandavas had become heroic warriors only because Sri Krishna happened to support them Otherwise they were no better than beggars in a prosperous kingdom

14

Hastinapura was bustling with war preparations Since Duryodhana had left for Dvarika, it devolved upon me to attend to weapons, battlefield, elephant regiment, cavalry—the lot Shon always present and alert, Shon was now no more At Duryo dhana's request, Ashvatthaman stepped in to fill the void He accompanied me not as an ashram inmate, nor a philosopher, but as a warrior, a committed fighter

Duhshasana was personally in charge of looking after the needs of the armies that had already arrived and encamped Uncle Shakuni was totally involved with writing clever communications to the rajas to persuade them to join the Kauravas Like streams at flood time rushing with the speed of wind to the ocean, the rajas of the neighbouring kingdoms converged on Hastinapura with their fourfold armies of horses, elephants, chariots and infantry The broad banks of the Ganga were dotted with countless military encampments

Ironsmiths worked noisily to produce hundreds of thousands of spears, swords, tridents and arrow-heads Sparks spluttered Syces tired themselves out saddling and reining the horses, and firing the bits The cooks hardly had time to get even a wink of sleep, so busy were they preparing cauldrons of food Specialists in the art of restoration of damaged chariots, buzzed like honeybees with their fine repair tools Such mounds of crushed soma creepers

had been heaped all round the drinking-hall that from a distance it was difficult even to make out the walls The strain of weaving fabric for tents dimmed the eyesight of the bands of weavers Bringing out the safely stored triangular royal standard, they used expensive blue silk thread to weave a lacy border on the edges, and in the centre they embroidered a gold-thread symbol of the sun The learned courtier Vidura personally handed over the large heraldic flag to Grandsire Bhishma

"The war won't be fought the way we want it " Word was freely and confidently circulating in the camps that Vidura, who made this statement, would not listen to anyone's plea but retire to the Himalayas before the start of the war Before doing so, he would escort the Queen Mother Kunti to Upaplavya—this too I had learnt through Prabhanjana The noise of brandishing and polishing of war weapons and the clip-clop of horses' hooves could be heard everywhere The war preparations were in full swing

Larger than any other concourse of pilgrims to a holy site in Aryavarta was this gigantic gathering of war-pilgrims around Hastinapura Each warrior-pilgrim was ready to beat with his arms on one or the other doorways to heaven Weapon piled upon weapon would become a divine staircase leading joyfully to the kingdom of the gods That was the cruelly just demand of the impending holocaust I could daily see from my palace balcony hundreds of thousands of self-confident, stalwart warriors strutting on all the city streets to fulfil that demand Day by day the normally snow-white pure waters of the Ganga turned a dullish muddy hue with the influx of new arrivals of war elephants and cavalry Hundreds of thousands of weapons from the armoury had been readied for battle All around, small white signs indicated the parameters of the battlefield Different-sized, -shaped and -hued conches from various kingdoms were on display on wooden platforms In different parts of the city stone lamps were kept lit till midnight in bedrooms This had never happened before Total crisis descended on the city founded by Maharaja Hasti The thick dark cloud-fogs of the month of Margashirsha swarmed around the walls of the palace

The Great War! The third Great War in my life The first when all those rajas fought in Kampilya at the time of Draupadi's *svayamvara* The second when Raja Duryodhana abducted Maharani Bhanumati, and I had to fight for him In both these,

many kings participated And now the third The first two were fought far away from our homeland, in others' territories Their consequences did not affect the Kauravas But but the third Great War was not going to be in a foreign land, it was very close to us, knocking at the gates of our own kingdom of Hastinapura—in Kurukshetra itself Was it not the sensible thing now to resolve all differences and stand united with whatever help could be had from whatever source? All my thinking led to this single conclusion There was no vacillation now I was ready to follow the call, having accepted the reality of the situation I was building up confidence in others The priority was to see that the tree of the Kaurava kingdom was firmly planted in the soil and stood beacon-straight Only then could the nests of Karna, Duryodhana, Ashvatthaman, Dhritarashtra and Grandsire Bhishma feel secure and safe First the land, the kingdom, then any concern for the individual citizen If we, the Kauravas, thousands of us, stood united hand in hand and fought with a single will, let alone the Himalayas, even the further inaccessible and allegedly invincible regions beyond the Himalayas, would easily fall under our control

Grandsire Bhishma, through his emissaries, laid down the rules of war after consultations with the Pandavas Putting aside their differences, Ashvatthaman and Duhshasana explained the rules to thousands of assembled warriors

"Never pick up and use a weapon once fallen on the ground Never attack the weaponless, the unchanoted, the dead, and the one who has surrendered Never kill those who cremate the dead, who serve soma-rasa, who cook food Foot-soldier will battle only with foot-soldier, cavalry with cavalry, elephant-warrior with elephant-warrior, mace-wielder with mace-wielder, swordsman with swordsman, chariot-hero with chariot-hero This is the conduct of warfare for every soldier Never forget to lay down arms at sunset " These and similar advices were offered by them to the armies To ensure that no mistake was made, they made the soldiers rehearse the rules In spite of the bitter cold of Margashirsha, the temperature of the city was warm

Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna, representing the Pandavas, arrived in Kurukshetra to study the logistics of the battlefield So did Grandsire Bhishma, from Hastinapura

Deciding on the battle positions of the elephants, cavalry, foot-soldiers, and chariots, without even a moment's stay in

Hastinapura itself, meeting the Queen Mother Kunti in Vidura's thatched hut as he passed by that way, Dhrishtadyumna went to Upaplavya. Seeing the mapped-out battlefield, Satyasena observed worriedly that it sloped towards the south. To check the truth of this, I myself went to the field. He was right. No matter how much filling was done, it would not be possible to level out the southern part of the field of battle, because it was an *exceptionally* large area.

Leaving aside the question of levelling the battlefield, how was my own life going to be levelled?

The fifth day of Margashirsha passed. The biting cold abated. From my balcony, I was eager to get a glimpse of Sri Krishna in the chariot of Dvarika returning Duryodhana as he entered the city. Behind him, the seven-*akshauhini*-strong Yadava army entered the city, but there was no sign of Sri Krishna. Could it be that he had succeeded in ensuring the neutrality of Sri Krishna? He is certainly clever enough to do so—thinking this, I went to welcome him. But he had returned from Dvarika half-successful—no, not successful at all—a total unsuccess. Sri Krishna had thwarted his political shrewdness. "I on one side, weaponless, on the other, a fully armed seven-*akshauhini*-strong Yadava army—choose which one you want." He placed this puzzling choice before Duryodhana. Ignoring my careful advice, Duryodhana chose the Yadava army.

"I want only you—whether weaponless, or with arms tied, or silent—but if you do not wish to come, please remain in Dvarika—I do not want your Yadava army." Duryodhana said nothing like this to bind Sri Krishna. Instead, he ran to me to announce how he had succeeded with his diplomatic insight in manoeuvring fifteen lakhs of Yadava soldiers to Hastinapura. "Karna, weaponless Sri Krishna and the flagpole on Arjuna's chariot—what's the difference? He will be Arjuna's charioteer, that's all. Instead of wielding arms, he will hold the reins and whip. Have we any shortage of charioteers among us? I have made the Kaurava army invincibly strong by bringing these fifteen lakhs of Yadava soldiers to our side. Or don't you think so?"

"Don't you know, your majesty, that the most effective weapon in war is known as Intelligence. It is true that Sri Krishna who will act as charioteer of Arjuna will only be holding the reins, but didn't you realise that he will not be reining in his tongue? The

least you could have done was to get him to agree to remain silent while driving the chariot " This is what I wanted to sav to that monarch acclaimed for his political shrewdness, but I kept silent The career of Raja Duryodhana of the powerful kingdom of Hastinapura was not particularly distinguished by admission of mistakes, correction of errors, and building up of trust and confidence There seemed to be no way out of the pitfalls and no light at the end of the tunnel of a self-created war of problems ignited around oneself, of senile, visionless policy-making in the hands of Grandsire Bhishma and Guru Drona, and the total lack of unity at a time of crisis Like a fly trapped in a web, the more he struggled, the more he got entangled I could see this clearly It all seemed such a mockery—he and the political path he had chosen I was restless for even a glimmer of hope But Duryodhana was so caught up in his own ego that he was not ready to trust anyone, he was thinking only, "I am the only capable one, no one will be able to withstand me, I am the only one with brains enough to run the ancient kingdom of Hastinapura " Even my suggestions and advices he would not entertain as advices and suggestions coming from a dear-as-life friend with abounding affection for him

He had turned up with the Yadava forces, leaving Sri Krishna behind

The total forces now comprised over eleven *akshauhinis* It was time now to appoint the commander-in-chief and the generals under him One by one, the armies marched towards the battlefield To the south of Kurukshetra clustered the army tents The capital was empty and desolate Giving permission to the soldiers to go, the ladies sprinkled water on the threshold and, performing *arati* before the family deity, they lit the eternal ritual lamps I also left Hastinapura in order to look after the armies

All the hustle and bustle of the capital was now concentrated in Kurukshetra Like clustering honeybees clinging to the hive and rubbing wings against each other, lakhs and lakhs of soldiers collected on the west of the battlefield of Kurukshetra

Anga, Angaraka, Alabdha, Ambashtaka, Alayudha, Alambusa, Arshyaringi—these rakshasa lords with magnificently ornamented bodies were busy herding thousands of elephants of the elephant regiment into their apportioned areas

Anashvasa, Anushalva, Aparajita, Achala, Arishtasena, Vinda, Anuvinda, Angada, Achyutayu, Ashoka, Ashvaketa, Ashada,

Arjava, Indravarman, Ishvara, Ugratirtha, Ugramanyu, Uluka and other learned horse-experts, after instructing the horse-riders, were totally absorbed in lining up the cavalry in single rows

Kshemadhurti, Kshemasharma, Bhagadatta, Kritavarma, Brihadbala, Bahlika, Niladhvaja, Chiravasasa, Dirghaprajna, Niyutayu, Paundraka, Dirghayu—these illustrious lords of the chariot were indicating to their charioteers their appointed stations

Guru Drona, Kripa, Shalya, Uncle Shakuni, Jayadratha, Ashvatthaman, Duryodhana, Duhshasana were supervising the movements of the vast-as-Ganga-in-spate 2,400,000-strong army

The multi-shaped, multi-coloured flags of the kingdoms of Magadha, Madra, Bahlika, Gandhara, Avanti, Nishadha, Sindha, Kalinga, Chedi and other kingdoms fluttered in the sky The waters of Kurukshetra-circling Sarasvati and sluggish-flowing Drishadvati were icy-cold even in the day time

The army tents had been erected in an orderly fashion After seeing to this, I returned to the capital

The second day of the dark fortnight of the month of Margashirsha was the day selected in Upaplavya

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As soon as the day of battle was decided by Sri Krishna, discussions began on the selection of the commander-in-chief Duryodhana was recommending my name to everyone, and Ashvatthaman, Duhshasana, Uncle Shakuni, Jayadratha and others were supporting him It was my hope, however, that Grandsire Bhishma, being the eldest, would deign to accept the post of commander-in-chief But if they all preferred me, I would have no choice but to accept It was my duty, therefore, to perform *anjali* with *arghya*-offerings before my father and receive his blessings These *arghya*-offerings prefaced the battle Father and son, friend and relation—it was not desirable to be involved in any such love-relationship at such a critical time Shraddha, unity, total dedication—no other emotions should be allowed at such a time

These thoughts engrossed me early one morning All around me a lifeless peace A devotee was ringing the bell in the nearby Vishnu mandir, the gentle vibrations of the sound wafted off and on to my ear Every drop of my *anjali*-worship, as it plopped in the

river, seemed to ask the Ganga, "Have you any recollection of the number of *anjalis* Karna has offered in his life?"

The Ganga turned her face and with her countless wavy eyes wanted an answer from my father to that question. I could sense the silent dialogue, neither could reply, so I was the one who had to speak. "Ganga-mata, I have probably offered as many *arghyas* as there are ripples in your waters, and Surya-deva, I have offered to you as many countless *arghyas* as there are sunbeams. Today I am only adding to those. Please accept them all as one. Does a mother ever consider her son a burden, a garden regret its blossoms, the sky its stars, the mango tree its flowers? So how can you possibly feel as a burden my shraddha-filled, bhakti-filled, and love-filled, even overflowing, *anjalis* which I offer you? You are my mother and my father. O Ganga, you alone have tided me over. Surya-deva, you have benefited me by cautioning and warning me when problems arose. I am your son, I am your son. Duryodhana, Uncle Shakuni, Ashvatthaman, Grandsire Bhishma, Vidura, and Maharaja Dhritarashtra—I don't have any desire to say even one word to any of them. They are merely co-travellers who briefly joined me in my journey through life. But you truly are that Supreme Deity for whom I have undertaken my troubled and difficult journey. Speak to me—tell me something, anything. Tell me, have I committed any blunder? Has there been any lapse in the performance of Karna's duties? Was I being selfish when I joined the Kauravas? Though not a Kaurava, I did so much for the Kauravas—did you do anything for me even though you were my father and mother? All Hastinapura says that cursed Karna, without his flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, is lustreless. How can I make them understand that if dark clouds come it does not mean that darkness is the lord of the world. Tell me, 'Karna is a victim of misfortune, Karna is helpless'—does anyone have the right to say that? Ultimately, how does one measure fate, ability, fame? Are they measured by wealth? Kingdom? Achievement? By a long life lived mechanically for a hundred years? No. I did not choose any of these. O Ganga, my life is like your countless lisping and lapping ripples. Surya-deva, my life has been like your thousands of sunrays bringing the gift of consciousness to the world. Sometimes, rain falls, and your arrow-like rays become white, green, blue, purple, and turn into the seven-hued rainbow. The day of the tournament, the *svayamvara* of Draupadi, the marriage with

Vrishali, the gift of the flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, the refusal of Krishna's proposal—don't these events make a rainbow which reveals the different emotions of my life?

"Give me strength that I may fight in the approaching battle in a way befitting your name and my lineage Accept these *anjalis* of my deepest devotion "

One, two, five, ten, fifty, hundred—the *anjali* water trickled from my hands into the waters of the Ganga I was oblivious of my surroundings Little by little my mind achieved the firm stability of the Himalayas

High noon The Sun-God exactly above my head The sands of the Ganga were flaming hot, because my bare arms could feel the extreme heat of the hot breezes that blew over them Half of me felt the cold waters of the Ganga, and the other half the burning heat carried by the wind Isn't it true that life's joys and sorrows lie juxtaposed in one's frame, like the cool waters of the Ganga next to the scorching sand on the river bank? It was late, and I turned to emerge from the river, because the meeting for the selection of the commander-in-chief could not start wihout me

I walked to the familiar kadamba-tree where I had left my shawl My mind was composed, and completely untroubled My soles burned the moment they touched the hot sand What if Duryodhana insisted that I be the commander-in-chief? It was not possible to convince the entire army of the greatness of Grandsire Bhishma How was it possible to convince Duryodhana, without hurting him, that the correct procedure would be to persuade Grandsire Bhishma to be commander-in-chief? After all, he was the eldest He had been leader of the Kauravas for years running, and he was the most suitable candidate for the post of commander-in-chief I would fight under his leadership Mulling over these thoughts, I reached the kadamba, and looked up to see if my shawl was still on the branch or if a gust of breeze had swept it away

What was it that I saw—reality or a dream?—the doubt was enough to make sand-grains of memory swish across the desert of my mind What was I? Was I still in the waters? Was I standing on the sand on the river bank? Was I Karna, or someone else? It was baffling Many heart-shaking experiences had come in my life, and I had faced them with truth as my witness, with patience and with fortitude But what I saw in front of me was enough to fling me into a deep pit of despair

It was the Queen Mother, white-haired Kunti-devi, standing on the blazing sand in the shade of my shawl under the kadamba-tree, trying to cover her face as well as her entire body from the Sun-God.

Just the darshan of her set the wheels of my life's chariot dizzily spinning. So many events! So many spokes! The bed of the Ashva-river! The reed-basket bobbing on the waters! My parentless childhood reared in the shelter of the decaying thatched hut of a charioteer's family! My lonely, sorrowful, insulted youth, embittered by catcalls of "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" My entire life, slapped about by the cruel, unfeeling waves of events that buffeted my battered, broken boat. And the humiliation that descended on me when I was not even conscious of my own dignity!

This was the lady who, instead of fashioning a graceful image out of a slab of stone, carved instead a dirty set of steps which were for all to trample. This was the lady who ripped my life's royal robe into shreds and merely to please society without any hesitation hung the strips on a thorny upland between two rivers to be displayed before all and sundry. This was the lady who flung my life's lotus in the muddy waters of Ashva river in an attempt to turn it into mud. This was the lady who took a royal gem worthy of setting in a crown and strung it beside cracked beryls on the neck of a charioteer. Why was she standing today in front of me? Lady—mother—magnificent mandir of auspiciousness—gracious glory of motherliness—holy place of reverence canticled by poets and revered by ascetics—place of salvation where perfected mortals, dedicated seekers, *gandharvas*, *charanas*, gods and others bow their heads—in what form had she appeared before me? What was the difference between the lady who stood before me and a lioness who devours her cub at birth?

My soles were aflame on the blazing sand. More aflame was my heart with her darshan. The whole cosmos seemed to be swirling and screaming to me, "You are a charioteer's son, Karna, a charioteer's son." It seemed to me that that lady also was blending her voice with the cosmic scream. I pressed my fists against my temples and shut my eyes. I wanted the flaming orb of the sun to fall on my head and melt me—what a blessing that would be! Even then this heartless lady would not think twice about turning back after walking over my melted body—would I be too troubled if she

really did this? This doubt assailed and worried me I opened my eyes and wanted to shout, "Go away! Leave me!" She remained standing, under the shade of my shawl, like a shrivelled figure This was our first meeting together This was the only time when I could taunt her about the heart-rending insults—"Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!"—which had been my lot It was my great good fortune that this chance had been given me

"Venerable Raj mata, a charioteer's son, the son of Radha, greets you " I paid my respects, kneeling on the hot sand It take a soul to caution a soul

"Karna! Rise—please rise—" She placed her hands on my arms to lift me

"Raj-mata, do not treat me with the respect due to an elder I am the son of Adhiratha, Maharaja Dhritarashtra's charioteer I am not a very fortune-favoured man If I were, I would have been your charioteer and served you "

"Karna, please don't treat me as royalty Sri Krishna has told you the whole truth Please don't say anything now to hurt and wound my heart Son, you know who I am You know very well who you are Tell me, can you recognise at least the tears in my eyes—or can't you?" She covered her troubled face with her hands and sobbed

"Tears! Tears don't extinguish the heart's flaming fires Why tears? Even if you break your head and come in front of me all bloodied, I will not recognise that blood—not now My life is a barren, hot desert which can never touch your cool, royal Ganga-life Who, after all, am I, and what am I? You are the Queen Mother, the fortune-blessed mother of the Pandavas "

"Karna, don't place a smouldering ember on the aged heart of your mother by calling her 'Queen Mother' Come, my son, embrace me " She stretched her trembling arms towards me Her eyelids flickered over her moist eyes

"'Mother' Heartless lady who wishes to be called 'Mother', your heart is such a hard stone that if a smouldering ember were placed on it, the ember would become cold and turn into ashes What gives you the right to come here and shamelessly ask me to address you as 'Mother'? Why of all days today has the maternal instinct arisen in you? Heartless one, you who come here pretending to a relationship, don't you know that my mother is the Ashva river, the Charmanvati, and the Ganga? My mother is Radha-

mata, who gave me shelter in her dilapidated thatched hut My mother is this sacred land of Aryavarta, which will give me the peace and consolation of her lap Don't ever again in front of Karna defile the purity of the word 'mother' by uttering it from your stained lips You can go Enjoy yourself with your five illustrious Pandava sons To attain merit, fast and do *puja* in Vidura's thatched hut Serve rice to Sri Krishna and plead before him, tell him that Adhiratha's son has lost his head, and deserves to have Bhima smash his skull with a mace Go Your wrinkled hands do not hold the oar that can stop the boat of my life that was launched on the Ashva river from rushing to its destination in the ocean of the universe The baby son whom you abandoned even before his umbilical cord was cut has today become the doom of your sons—see this, and weep your silent tears Try doing yourself even for a few seconds what I have done all my life Go Karna is not your son—you are not his mother Even an enemy will never give the punishment that you gave to an innocent, unknowing new-born baby—what you did is unforgivable "

"Karna, you have lived too long with the Kauravas, and learnt to speak like Duryodhana and Duhshasana You are forgetting that fate has given you a masculine heart to endure your terrible sufferings, but I?—*Arre,* the sufferings I am passing through, they are worse than death Fate has cruelly buffeted my life's bark from my childhood and made it drift as it pleased My abandonment of you was not the rejection of a son by a mother Countless women are always yearning for sons How can there be a mother who will without reason cast away her son? But—but your birth took place under such circumstances that the only way to get respect for you and me was this My son, the sorrow I felt for seventy years separated from you was a mother's agony which my five sons had no inkling of Sri Krishna, my brother-in-law Vidura-ji, and even Bhishma were given no inkling And today you are unwilling to understand my pain Can any woman see my separation from you, my widowhood, the forest exile of my sons, the way you were insulted, Draupadi's distress, and today the way brother has confronted brother—and not go insane?

"Did your wonderful father, who illuminates the universe and provides a path through the darkness, ever show me the path? Did he even brighten your life? No, Karna The sufferings of ordinary people are ordinary also Similarly, the sufferings of extraordinary

people are extraordinary. It's best that you endure everything in silence. You have done that already; now put an end to all of them. Come, join my sons. Let me see my dream come true—see you crowned by all. Come. Only to see this dream come true have I for seventy years filled my eyes with tears and kept my yearning ablaze. My son, wicked Duryodhana, with occasional flattering words, has fanned the embers of hate in your heart, like a perpetually burning *yajna*-fire, against my sons, your own brothers. Come, quench that fire with the joyful tears shed by your brothers. My sons who, on my instruction, agreed to share a common wife, will listen to me, place their heads at your feet, and beg sobbing forgiveness of you. The very same whip that Bhima brandished at you, he will place in your hands, and bend his broad back before you to receive its lash. He will die, but not utter one sigh of pain. At the time of your coronation, to show his love for you, Arjuna will take his invincible Gandiva bow and exhaustless quiver of arrows and fling them into the blazing *yajna*-fire with his own hands. And your brother Yudhishthira, who has always talked to me about your beautifully-shaped feet, will wash them with sacred water collected from all the rivers of the kingdom. And my modest daughter-in-law Draupadi, who has spent her life looking after others, will pass the rest of her life serving you... and...and only for you...my innermost soul struggling in the dark cave of my personality will cast away its body-garment and happily seek admission at the door of heaven. Come, Karna, join your *brothers.*" *She shook me hard by my shoulders.*

"What hypocrites you all are—your brave son who used Indra as a decoy to rob me of my flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, who sacrificed Sudamana and Shon; your daughter-in-law who spurned me by addressing me as 'son of a charioteer'; Bhima who insulted me by calling me a charioteer, the same Bhima who knows nothing except how to howl when he gets hungry; and you who thrust an innocent, unknowing, helpless baby into the foaming waters of the Ashva river.... Even if all of you agree to accept me as brother, husband, and son, you are nothing better than total eternal frauds. And you expect me to come you and prove this to be true? Never! Even a deceitful, wicked, cunning and heartless man is head-and-shoulders above a hypocrite and a fraud. Go. If you think that wealth, kingdom, and shows of love can change a man's views, I will place all the wealth of my world-conquering mission at your

feet . Don't flourish the mask of a pretended love for a son in front of me My hands which have held the whip and the sceptre with equal ease have also respected you Consider that as your good fortune, and leave this place, now "

"Pretended love for a son! Tell me, in my chariot made for six horses, haven't you seen only five yoked? Don't you remember at all the silk sari and finger-protectors I gave at your wedding? When you returned from your world-conquest, the rishi's daughter placed a kumkum tilak on your forehead—or have you forgotten that already? When you arrived for the Rajasuya *yajna*, wasn't the arm-bracelet that fell from my hands from the balcony at your feet meant for your son Vrishasena? The royal sobbing lady in the painting on the wall in Indraprastha, is me—the walls of Indraprastha will tell you that even today, or don't you have faith in walls? I saw your illustrious feats in the arena and I was not able to acknowledge you, and my *anchal* became taut as a whip, and my blouse was wet, and you can listen to this, and yet refuse to face the truth Tell me, will you believe I am your mother only if I shout it at every crossing in Hastinapura? Tell me! Because, if that is what you want, then that is what I'll do "

"What does it matter what you want to do? The world is not ready to acknowledge the truth—and I do not need such acknowledgment now You half-killed me at birth by abandoning me, and today with these words said and unsaid you have killed me completely How is it that today of all days was the only auspicious time that you could find in all of seventy years to come to me? Tell me, supposing at this time Bhima were standing where I stand, what then? Wouldn't he have without thinking twice struck his mace on your head and drenched the dry earth under your feet with your blood? Supposing Yudhishthira were in my place? Wouldn't he have discarded his royal robes and donning saffron retired as a sannyasi to the Himalayas, leaving all of you behind? And your life-precious Arjuna? Wouldn't he have slung his Gandiva bow round your neck and shaken you up? But but I have paid my respects to you It's not all useless courtesy to gain false prestige, I've respected you because of what Krishna told me about our kinship But what have *you* given to me? Even an enemy will not inflict such terrible pain, such horrific deception as confounds even the wide-awake Go, Queen Mother A woman does not become a mother merely by giving birth Even by not

people are extraordinary It's best that you endure everything in silence You have done that already, now put an end to all of them Come, join my sons Let me see my dream come true—see you crowned by all Come Only to see this dream come true have I for seventy years filled my eyes with tears and kept my yearning ablaze My son, wicked Duryodhana, with occasional flattering words, has fanned the embers of hate in your heart, like a perpetually burning *yajna*-fire, against my sons, your own brothers Come, quench that fire with the joyful tears shed by your brothers My sons who, on my instruction, agreed to share a common wife, will listen to me, place their heads at your feet, and beg sobbing forgiveness of you The very same whip that Bhima brandished at you, he will place in your hands, and bend his broad back before you to receive its lash He will die, but not utter one sigh of pain At the time of your coronation, to show his love for you, Arjuna will take his invincible Gandiva bow and exhaustless quiver of arrows and fling them into the blazing *yajna*-fire with his own hands And your brother Yudhishthira, who has always talked to me about your beautifully-shaped feet, will wash them with sacred water collected from all the rivers of the kingdom And my modest daughter-in-law Draupadi, who has spent her life looking after others, will pass the rest of her life serving you and and only for you my innermost soul struggling in the dark cave of my personality will cast away its body-garment and happily seek admission at the door of heaven Come, Karna, join your brothers " She shook me hard by my shoulders

"What hypocrites you all are—your brave son who used Indra as a decoy to rob me of my flesh ear-rings and skin-armour, who sacrificed Sudamana and Shon, your daughter-in-law who spurned me by addressing me as 'son of a charioteer', Bhima who insulted me by calling me a charioteer, the same Bhima who knows nothing except how to howl when he gets hungry, and you who thrust an innocent, unknowing, helpless baby into the foaming waters of the Ashva river Even if all of you agree to accept me as brother, husband, and son, you are nothing better than total eternal frauds And you expect me to come you and prove this to be true? Never! Even a deceitful, wicked, cunning and heartless man is head-and-shoulders above a hypocrite and a fraud Go If you think that wealth, kingdom, and shows of love can change a man's views, I will place all the wealth of my world-conquering mission at your

feet. Don't flourish the mask of a pretended love for a son in front of me. My hands which have held the whip and the sceptre with equal ease have also respected you. Consider that as your good fortune, and leave this place, now."

"Pretended love for a son! Tell me, in my chariot made for six horses, haven't you seen only five yoked? Don't you remember at all the silk sari and finger-protectors I gave at your wedding? When you returned from your world-conquest, the rishi's daughter placed a kumkum tilak on your forehead—or have you forgotten that already? When you arrived for the Rajasuya *yajna*, wasn't the arm-bracelet that fell from my hands from the balcony at your feet meant for your son Vrishasena? The royal sobbing lady in the painting on the wall in Indraprastha, is me—the walls of Indraprastha will tell you that even today, or don't you have faith in walls? I saw your illustrious feats in the arena and I was not able to acknowledge you, and my *anchal* became taut as a whip, and my blouse was wet, and you can listen to this, and yet refuse to face the truth. Tell me, will you believe I am your mother only if I shout it at every crossing in Hastinapura? Tell me! Because, if that is what you want, then that is what I'll do."

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giving birth, a woman with good nurture can mould a lump of mud into an idol What a royal lady could not do, a lowcaste lady, Radha mata, has done perfectly Return, royal lady, to the palace or to the thatched hut—go where you will You were a confused mother, and you will remain one You could never understand the way Rama's mother Kaushalya suffered and agonised for him to the point of death The supreme boon of motherhood which you received was misinterpreted by you as a life-long curse If you haven't come here begging, go immediately, go far, very far You have no right to stand here on the holy bank of the Ganga "

"I haven't come here to return empty-handed I am here to take you back with me Kaushalya, who was ready to sacrifice her life for Rama, stayed back in the palace No son of hers sided with Ravana I stay in a thatched hut Why? So that I can go about parading as the Queen Mother? No, my son Some time or other I will be able to wash clean the stain that has blackened your pure life—that alone is what has kept me alive all these years And if you need proof of my mother-love, I'm ready to sacrifice my life to convince you, by making the Ganga witness at this very instant But please don't side with Duryodhana in this war Don't consume your own brothers in the fire of your valour " She moved swiftly in the direction of the Ganga's bank, intent on offering her body to the river

Though firm as a flag pole, my body trembled Even my mind, made strong by *arghya* offerings, became apprehensive

"Wait!" I said to her Like a royal chariot halting when the reins are pulled, she stopped Going near her, I said gently, "Tell me, what is it that you want? What can I do for you without betraying Duryodhana?"

Give my five sons assurance of protection They are your brothers—don't kill them I am your mother, yet I come to you with outspread *anchal* begging for alms You have given your flesh-ear rings and skin-armour to Indra, you have provided the suffering and the needy with money, food and clothing Give me this little at least five lives " Covering her agitated countenance with her hands, the royal lady sobbed It seemed to me that my heart was breaking into pieces All the events that had fallen to my lot—had even Fate ever experienced what I have experienced? My own life-giver was standing in front of me as a beggar

What blood-relationship did I really have with the charioteer's son who used to address me in that manner? Nevertheless, hadn't he given me all my life the *vakula*-flowers of his unchanging love? He was gone, but the fragrance of his memory lingered in my heart like the scent of dried-up *vakula*-flowers impregnating the atmosphere. He was a charioteer, yet he had showered utterly selfless love on a Kshatriya. And I—I was spurning my own mother who for nine months had nourished me in her womb! I was rejecting my mother who had suffered separation from her son for seventy years! Good or bad, whatever my life was, wasn't it what it was because of her? Was I going to spend the rest of my life basking in the intoxicating glory of my elevation into a commander-in-chief in a world of soldiers? After all, she hadn't made any very huge demand for herself. All she had asked was that I address her once as "Mother". Where was I heading—I who had all my life puctiliously fulfilled my duties but today was unable to perform a son's duty? How could I even be sure that she would meet me again sometime in the future? Why couldn't I understand the simple fact that a Queen Mother, honoured by everybody, had come and waited so long like a helpless bird under the shelter of my shawl? Wasn't it true that the headiness of fame and power was stronger than the intoxication of wine? Who was whose commander-in-chief? What kind of a warrior anyway? What great chariot-hero? How can a person who spurns his own mother ever hope to attain any kind of heaven? Wasn't heaven shraddha for one's mother? Wasn't that the desired salvation?

"Mother, wait," I called out, raising my arms. Like a cow in a forest, hearing a lost calf's call, rushing blindly, tail uplifted and ears cocked, she, forgetting age, place, time, occasion, heard me say "Mother" and ran towards me. Even the rolling heat-waves of the burning sands seemed to me to fade before the agonised flames of her separation from me. I fell at her feet and said, "Mother, forgive your Karna. Because of you, your sons have achieved the highest glories: the glory of happiness, of popularity, of majesty, of pride and prestige. They have surely revered you again and again for all this. Mother, today your eldest son for the first time reveres you as a son. It may be the last time as well. Why am I doing this? Because you... only you... have given me a glimpse of the highest glory—of sorrow." Tears from my eyes washed the grains of sand on her feet. Tears from her eyes—the pure drops of her soul—

dripped on my head. Had my body turned into a fistful of sand, and that fistful of sand merged with the sand on the bank—what great difference would that have made, now?

"Rise." She stroked my head, and raised me up with trembling hands. With tear-filled eyes, she said chokingly, "You've... you've grown so tall, Karna. You're taller... even than me." She pulled me strongly into her large embrace. I felt blessed and grateful—experiencing in her short frame the mother's heart grander than and shaming even the tallest peak of the Himalayas. Tears of gratitude, tears of beautiful beatitude fell on her white head, as if saying, "Mother, your life is as pure and white as your hairs—no matter what the world says about your abandoning me."

For an instant she laid her head against my chest. Did she expect to hear my heartbeat throbbing "Mother, Mother"?

Briefly, the hot sands under our feet cooled with our mixed tears streaming down. What great joy this sandy spot was experiencing—a son of radiance meeting again his radiant mother—what else was there but this hot sandy spot to inform the Sun-God of what was happening? Waves of intense heat vibrated skywards to tell my father, "Your long-separated-and-sorrowing son has met his long-separated-and-sorrowing mother."

"This is the truth which I have cherished so long." She untied a ring from a corner of her garment, the ring which on my return from my world-conquering mission I had placed in the basket of an ashram girl, and she slipped it on my little finger. The ring's inset yellow sapphire glowed.

"I must leave now." I touched her feet once more, and made my way over the sands. And she moved in the direction of the thatched hut.

16

"Hero of Charities, World-Conquering Raja of Anga, Maharaja Karna!" As soon as the herald announced my entry, those sitting inside the tent, Niladhvaja, Jalasangha, Bhagadatta, Sahadeva, Samitinjaya, Mahaujas, Hemakampana, Sayammani, Vipata, Ruchiparva, Viradhanva, Vasumitra, Jayavarman, Jayadratha, Pratapa, Sutanjaya, Darada, Sunaman and other military chiefs rose to welcome me affectionately. Ashvatthaman proposed that the commander-in-chief be selected. The meeting commenced

Quickly, Duryodhana stood up and proposed my name Many hands rose enthusiastically in approval They had forgotten that Grandsire Bhishma, vanquisher of axe-wielding Parashurama, was in their midst So I rose They had the impression that I did so to accept my nomination

"It is my desire that Grandsire Bhishma should become the Kaurava commander-in-chief He has the ability to vanquish even Bhagavan Prashurama " I removed all their speculations Unanimously they hailed Grandsire Bhishma as their leader. The only person silent was Duryodhana, because he wanted me to become the army chief and I had frustrated his wish But he was compelled to keep silent in front of the assembled warriors

Grandsire Bhishma rose from his seat and announced his acceptance The royal *purohita* placed a white-flower garland around his wrist and consecrated him commander-in-chief The Kaurava commander-in-chief started explaining the war strategy to the chiefs

"Remember—any violation of the norms of military conduct deflects the course of battle into improper channels You are seasoned warriors, not professional killers On the strength of your unwavering support, I promise that I will succeed in making Sri Krishna take up arms That is why it is imperative that the leaders of the regiments which I am assigning to certain positions should on no account shift their posts without specific instructions from me Total obedience is the soul of victory

"Pratikaman will head the charioteers under the supervision of Raja Shalya of Madra He should note the fact that our chariots total 240,000 Shalya and Pratikaman will see to it that there is never any shortage of charioteers

"Duhshasana will head the elephant force, assisted by the rakshasa chiefs Alambusha, Alayudha, and Angaraka Our elephants equal in number our chariots They will start mounting the canopies of all the elephants from today

'Shakuni will head the cavalry, assisted by Sanjaya, Kshemadhurti, Chirvasas, and Ashvatthaman Our cavalry totals 721,000 Without their express command, not a single horse must move

'Duryodhana will lead the foot-soldiers, assisted by Jayad ratha, Samundrasena, and Indravarma Our foot soldiers total

1,203,000, the task of the leaders is to see that the foot-soldiers never come in front of our elephant regiments

"Our total army strength is 2,405,700, deployed in four main divisions chariots, elephants, cavalry, and foot-soldiers The gravest duty of our commanders is to ensure that, even under the worst of conditions, the divisions do not create confusion by inter-mixing

"Foot-soldiers, the vanguard, the *gulma*-divisions, the *gana*-ranks, the *vahini*-segments, the *pritana* bodies of 243 elephants, 243 chariots, 729 infantry and 1215 cavalry each, the *chamu*-bodies of 729 elephants, 729 chariots, 2187 cavalry, and 3646 infantry, and the *anakini*-groups—each *akshauhini* consisting of these will proudly march to victory, following strict orders The major responsibility in this battle will fall on the chariot-ranks So I will now enumerate the maha-chariot-warriors, the *ati-rathis*, the *ardha-rathis*, and the ordinary chariot-fighters Drona and Kripa are the maha-chariot-warriors in over-all control of the chariot-force

"Ashvatthaman, Jayadratha, Shakuni, Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Vikarna, Shalya, Chitrasena, Vivinshati, Duhsaha, Jaya, Satyavrata and Purumitra are maha-chariot-warriors, entitled to lead the chariots at any time they wish

"Kshemadhurti, Lakshmana, Vinda, Anuvinda, Aparajita, Uluka, Sahadeva, and Bhagadatta are *ati-rathis* who will follow as they advance, giving support from the rear

"Kuhara, Karakaksha, Ambashtaka, Arjava, Kratha, Gavaksha, and Karna are *ardha-rathis* You will all be surprised to hear me name Karna as an *ardha rathi*, but, bereft of his flesh ear-rings and skin-armour and afflicted with a curse, Karna today is not more capable than an *ardha rathi* "

That eldest-of-all, impartial, harshly-just, respected as truthloving aging Kaurava warrior started ordering me as an ordinary *ardha-rathi*, a minor chariot-warrior, as soon as he became the commander-in-chief—as if he had taken leave of his senses! He had no idea of what was happening beyond the limits of Hastina pura, like a drunken man, Grandsire Bhishma had the effrontery to brand a world-conquering hero as an *ardha rathi*! Seeing myself reduced in this fashion in front of the hundreds of heroes who had openly acknowledged me as their leader, I began to wonder whether their hairs had turned white with age or by exposure to the sun Had his mind become senile like his trembling body? Was

this the same justice-espousing warrior who in the tournament had proclaimed my glory as an invincible archer? Only a minute ago I had suggested his name for commander-in chief, which was enthusiastically accepted, what had turned his head so that he was now classifying me as an *ardha-rathi*? Or was it that he felt that the insulting embers placed on my head by so many were not enough, and he was seeing to it that, before the battle, he would complete the noble task by adding the final insult? I had believed that truth still existed in the world in his person Was he trying to prove to me that my belief was false? There was no elder so far among those who had mocked me—was he trying to make up for that lack in front of the assembled warriors? Bhishma The son of Ganga The disciple of Parashurama The devotee of Sri Krishna He was ordering a world conquering hero deserving to be a commander-in chief by describing him as a mere *ardha rathi* Ah! I felt that Truth no more had any place in this world My ear-lobes trembled and seemed to be on fire The veins on my throat swelled The pupils of my eyes burned So today finally I will have to give this sly old man what he deserves He was a devotee who stood in the waters of the Ganga and propitiated the Sun—but he failed to recognise the son of the Sun! Today I will see to it that the recognition comes to him Good I was ready to put aside reverence and affection if they interfered with the performance of my duty There is no difference between a bat holing up in a tree and a proud old man glued to a seat of power Both become blind Their ignorance or arrogance makes them unable to see the reality of the world It was time to remove the veil from their eyes I jumped up

Grandsire, *ardha rathi* I am not, I am not even an *ansha rathi*, the lowest of chariot-fighters I am just the son of a charioteer But keep in mind this—this self respecting ordinary son of a charioteer is not particularly anxious to serve under your arrogant leader ship—I say this in front of all the illustrious heroes gathered here I, Karna, refuse to take up arms in battle *until such time as* Arjuna's deadly arrows strike down the so called maha chariot warrior Bhishma Go, see if you can kill even a single Pandava on the battlefield with all the valour of your leadership—that alone will entitle you to sing praises of your maha chariot hero skill in front of Karna You have spent your years flattering the Pandavas, in spite of that your valour is useless

"Forgive me, Kaurava leaders I am leaving you to yourselves The trouble is that everything's become topsy turvy today Imagine—volcanoes are erupting from the peaks of the Himalayas! The flower-garland around the neck of the Kauravas has become a snake biting the jugular vein of the Kauravas And so I warn all of you Beware! Be careful! Call me only after the fall of this proud and sly old man I am ready to serve you I am aware of what it means to give one's word I will stand firm by my word But today I must beg to be excused The world can go to ruin, but I will not fight under this commander-in-chief Let no one dare allege that I fled from the field of battle out of fear—because I will remain on the battlefield I will not leave my tent on the battlefield and go seek shelter in the capital "

Without waiting to see what impact my words had on whom, I left the tent instantly Tossed on the waves of a turbulent ocean, hurled and buffeted incessantly, a log of wood finally comes to rest on the shore, my mind too was now feelingless and thoughtless, lying unmoving inside my body

There was nothing to do except stand on the edge of the battlefield and hear accounts of the feats of the warriors

And what if Grandsire Bhishma did not fall in battle? That thought alone was enough to push my mind into a deeper numbness

17

From my tent the vast battlefield was clearly visible The only other person in the tent was Satyasena I had given strict instructions to him that, with the exception of Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman, no one was to be permitted to enter He gave me daily reports of important matters relating to the army Duryodhana had refused to reinforce his army with the soldiers of the redoubtable Raja Rukmin of Vidarbha He was under the suspicion that, given the chance, Raja Rukmin would defect to the Pandavas Of course, he had accepted the help of Raja Shalya of Madra, the maternal uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva Not only that, by putting the body of charioteers under his leadership, Grandsire Bhishma had in effect placed the helm of the army in the hands of relatives of the Pandavas

Rukmin, Bhuritejas, and Bhumipal—these rajas were

considered neutral by both sides. Their flags were nowhere to be seen among the armies. In the east, the Pandavas erected their tents around Kurukshetra. The flags of Matsya, Panchala, Rakshasa and others could be seen fluttering there. Numerically they seemed to be very few indeed: only about 1,500,000. Satyasena was confident that this army would not be able to withstand a Kaurava attack. The news that the Pandavas had chosen Arjuna as their commander-in-chief had begun circulating in the Kaurava ranks.

I could see in front of me Arjuna's magnificent Nandighosha chariot with its ape-banner aloft. But my Jaitra chariot with its elephant-symbol and its sceptre-banner stood idle in the chariot ranks. Grandsire Bhishma had ordered its wheels removed. Why? Why did that old man stoop so low in his old age? Just because he loved Arjuna? Sitting in my tent, I asked these questions, looking up at the white ceiling. Not one answer came. Like a burning torch, my mind flamed my nights awake. Radha-mata, Adhiratha, Vrishali, Supriya, Satyasena, Meghamala, my seven sons, and Minakshi—weren't they the only ones I could call mine? But I had made a promise, and that promise prevented me from going to the city to meet them.

Vrishasena, Chitrasena, Sudamana, Prasena, Susharma, and Bhanusena—these six sons of mine came to me dressed in warriors' uniforms. They did not speak. On my questioning, the eldest, Vrishasena, remarked seriously, "Maharaja, if you don't take up arms, we also will refuse to go to battle." That really hurt me. In their effort to be one with their father, they were betraying their kingdom.

"My sons, remember that though you are my children, you are also Kaurava warriors. Obey without questioning whatever orders are given by your commander-in-chief. Go to battle behind him with the blessings of your mother, your grandmother, and your father. Go. Your father orders you." I said this, looking out of the latticed window at the waters of the Drishadvati. "Whatever you desire, father." They left, after duly venerating me. Vrishaketu was not among them.

"Why didn't Vrishu come to meet me?" I asked myself.

"He is upset with you, because you refuse to go to the city." Satyasena thought I was asking him, so he volunteered this ready reply.

"Satyasena, go and bring that mischievous young man here, on any pretext He has to be explained everything "

18

Bathed in moonlight, the military camps of Kurukshetra, dotted with tents, presented a tranquil spectacle My own people, who had showered the moonlight of their love on my life's tent, were all in the palace in the capital And I lay on my bed in my tent at the edge of Kurukshetra, trying vainly to coax sleep to come to me that never came

Sixty years ago, when I came with Shon to Hastinapura, I would never have believed that this could happen to me And now all had come to pass in my life Like some undesired, bewildering, crooked arrow, flying awry I couldn't even recall all its twists and turns I could not even forget the incidents I wanted to forget My memories sprawled like the countless tents that made up the clusters of military encampments all around me As innumerable as the stars twinkling alongside the moon in the sky Like the waves of the Drishadvati that cannot be counted Sleep did not favour me, so I rose from my bed and, placing some ornaments on my head, I went over to the battlefield Seeing the white ash lines on the field, I was reminded instantly of Uncle Shakuni's gambling board Tomorrow, countless lives would be staked and gambled away on this earth-board All present would have to accept the throw of Death's dice Without question How Destiny makes every place pure and holy How many massive *yajnas* had been performed by Maharaja Kuru on this very field! From tomorrow this field would witness a sacrifice of human lives I stooped, scooped up a fistful of earth, and touched my head with it Earth! Duryodhana's politicking, Ashvatthaman's deep philosophic knowledge, Uncle Shakuni's chicanery, Duhshasana's evil designs, Grandsire Bhishma's helpless "neutrality", Guru Drona's mixed-up vision of social idealism, the self-seeking sight behind Maharaja Dhritarashtra's sightless eyes, Vidura's inglorious renunciation, my entire life's intricacies, the ignorance of the Pandavas concerning me, the heart-melting travails of Kunti-mata's life, the deliberate bandaging of Gandhari Devi's eyes, Radha-mata's wondrous, profound love capable of dissolving even stone, Shon's selfless love, the serene feminine compassion in the

hearts of Vrishali and Supriya, the obedient nature of my sons, the unswerving loyalty to the crown, loyalty to friends, and loyalty to truth of every soldier in the Kaurava and Pandava ranks, the unparalleled Kshatriya energy emanating from Sri Krishna—didn't these rise and grow from out of this earth itself?

Reverently I tied my fistful of earth in one end of my shawl The ash marked lines shining prominently in the moonlight tomorrow would be all wiped out And this field of Kurukshetra, unwettable by anything except rain, would be drenched with blood, sweat and tears These liquids will flow in one vast liquidity, basic bodies disintegrate into the five elements, and the deathless lights of individual atmans merge in the eternal Divine Radiance The echoes of this battle will reverberate through the history of Aryavarta yuga after yuga Crores of chroniclers will not be able to do justice to the valiant feats of eighty lakhs of hands belonging to forty lakh warriors, nor will crores of singers succeed in adequately chanting the glories of the battle The white bright clear river of Sarasvati, goddess of learning and knowledge, would keep on flowing as always The awesome, silent, voiceless grains of dust of this battlefield will shine eternally in the light of the Sun

'I *pranama* you, O hallowed land of Aryavarta!"

I joined both palms, and bowed in salutation to the field of battle

Hardly had I laid myself down on the bed in my tent than a profound sleep overlook me

19

The day chosen by Sri Krishna dawned—the second day of the dark fortnight, glowing in the golden rays of the morning sun

Emerging from my tent, I looked around Like ants filing out of an anthill, one by one, armour clad warriors, picking up their different weapons, scurried out of their tents Nandaka, Nikumbha, Drumasena, Prabhankara, Ruchiparva, Lalittha, Vasuchandra, Senajit, Sudhanu, Bhurishravas, Jayarata, Rukmaratha, Siddhartha, Bhanudatta, Govasana, Shalva, Jayatsena, Damana, Shatachandra, Shakradeva, Dhritayudha, Vibhu, Vajrahasta, Somadatta, Samyamana and others began organising their regiments

Two hundred and forty thousand—a rolling chariot ocean of *rathis, ati rathis* and maha chariot heroes congregated The tents

became depopulated Seven hundred thousand horses—grey, white, black and brown excellent fully saddled specimens—stood flank to flank in battle ranks Their reins were jerked upwards Their tails swelled, their ears cocked Two hundred and fifty thousand caparisoned elephants became a black heaving ocean, the flapping ears of the pachyderms its breakers In the middle, like shoals of countless deva-fish swimming on the surface, were their black trunks, gracefully curved like swans' necks More than half of the twelve hundred thousand army of foot-soldiers were busily feeding them wine from over-flowing jars *Pattis, senamukhas, gulmas, ganas, vahinis, pritanas, chamus, anakinis* and *akshauhinis* assembled into appropriate battle formations Scintillating gleams of light from the tips of arrows, spears, tridents, swords, lances and other weapons, caused by the turbulent to-and-fro-ing of the warriors, shot upwards into the emptiness of the sky as if seeking the kingdom of heaven Donning their helmets and armours, Grandsire Bhishma, Guru Drona, Acharya Kripa, Ashvatthaman, Jayadratha, Uncle Shakuni, Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Bhagadatta, Vikarna, Kritavarma, Somadatta, Sahadeva, Ketumat, Vinda and Anuvinda moved among the four-fold army divisions, deploying them on strategic lines

The day had arrived which I had waited for so expectantly every second all these years, yet what could I do, standing at the door of my tent, except play the role of a neutral observor of life's dance of cosmic dissolution?

"Karna, we have to leave " Embracing me, Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman climbed into their magnificent chariots loaded with their varied weapons My six sons touched my feet with their heads

'I hope you have taken the blessings of your mothers, Radha mata, father, Satyasena, and Meghamala, have placed fragrant flowers on the samadhi of your Uncle Shon, and have consecrated never-to be-widows the foreheads of your wives with warm blood from your thumbs " I put these questions to them

"We have obtained blessings from all of them We need your blessings," Vrishasena said, kneeling and bowing his head, unsheathing his sword and holding it by the blade

"Go, my brave sons, fight with a single mind " I spread my arms wide and embraced all six Though I had myself received ambivalent treatment from my father, I had no intention of

depriving my sons of paternal attention even for a second. Thumping their backs, and waving my finger at them, I said, "Go. And see that no soldier feels the absence of Karna on the battlefield. And... and don't forget that before you go to battle you must each offer to the Sun God five oblations of *arghya*-homage from the pure water of the Drishadvati river. Go."

They mingled in the battle-formations with a calm mind. A cacophony of sky-rending sounds from war-drums, bugles, *dundubhi*-drums, tabors, kettledrums and other percussion instruments made half-sleepy birds forsake their nests and wheel noisily across the sky to the Mainaka hill. The heart-piercing trumpeting of elephants, the furious neighing of horses, the shouting and screaming of soldiers praising Maharaja Dhritarashtra by name made the frothing waves of the Drishadvati river even more tumultuous. The warriors were assembled on the field like a huge scattering of *parijata*-flowers.

Grandsire Bhishma lowered the ochre triangular Kaurava royal standard fluttering on a tall flagpole and fixed it on his war-chariot. It flapped against the background of a vivid blue sky. Cupping a gracefully curving conch in both hands, Commander-in-Chief Bhishma, the veins on his neck swelling, his beard spread straight, blew into it loudly. The peal careened through the field, charging the strong arms of the warriors with energy.

"On-w-a-r-d!" he ordered, lifting his bow with both hands. Following the path indicated by the ash-smeared lines, the 25 lakhs strong Kaurava army marched towards the battlefield of Kurukshetra, like thundering clouds blanketing the sky before the onset of the monsoon. Unable to control myself, I closed my eyes briefly. Without me to lead them, these warriors who loved me more deeply than life itself were marching to battle—the same warriors for whose sakes I had renounced my brothers and my mother, and sided with the Kauravas out of a sense of duty. I should be there mobilising them, instead, I was observing their feats, from a safe distance. The relentlessly cruel Fate that had pursued me all my life was seeing to it that I remained helpless now.

They were able to do completely without me in this hour of crisis—the very same people whose sceptre I have established as a symbol of divine authority in Aryavarta by staking my own life. Society finds no one indispensable—no matter how superior he is,

how self-sacrificing, how hard-working The colossal Ganga of society keeps forever flowing The water drops inside it keep changing, today's drops vanish tomorrow, new drops take their place—but the Ganga keeps flowing on Why should I consider myself so precious? No individual should think too much of himself that was the lesson the huge Kaurava army was teaching me Gazing with a tranquil mind at the battle-hungry brave warriors, I forgot myself, my joys and sorrows, my life's dreams, my kith and kin How effortlessly had the clear lines of Life and Death gathered in and around the battlefield of Kurukshetra Anyone seeing the hordes of brave warriors would think the stars of the sky had fallen on Kurukshetra When indeed had even the palace in Hastinapura witnessed such large numbers of massive bodied chariot-heroes congregated like tightly packed mountain ranges? There was hardly a country whose royal standard was not represented in that array of military homage to Kurukshetra—Vahlika, Sindha, Kulinda, Madra, Kamboja, Gandhara, Matsya, Avanti, Darada, Anarta, Dasharna, Chedi, Dvarika, Kashi, Panchala, Magadha, Videha, Kosala, Anga, Kalinga, Banga What an auspicious, memorable day had dawned before the eyes of the Kurus!

My chain of thought snapped as Krishna blew on his sky-shattering conch, the Panchajanya It was Arjuna now, advancing on his ape-bannered Nandighosha chariot, leading an army of a hundred and fifty thousand Clouds of dust arose His charioteer, blue-skinned Sri Krishna, was smiling A hundred-and-fifty-thousand-strong army hailed the majesty of Maharaja Pandu It consisted of the following maha-chariot-heroes Amitaujas, Vikranna, Drupada, Kuntibhoja, Vardhakshemi, Dandadhara, Brihatakshatra, Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, Abhimanyu, the Raja of Kashi, Shatranjaya, Chekitana, Virata, Yudhamanyu, Shenajit, and Yuyudhana, the following *ati-rathis* Babhru, Adina, Rativindhya, Purujit, Shreniman, Iravan, Shatanika Behind them came a host of rajas Sinhachandra, Sukshatra, Shaivya, Rochamana, Rathasena, Yugandhara, Maniman, Mahaujas, Mitravarman, Brahmadeva, Tapana, Suparshva, Janamejaya, Sudama, Sutejas, Chitraketu, Ugrasena and others In the front were Arjuna, Yudhisthira, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, Satyaki, Yuyudhana, Dhrishtadyumna They advanced from the front in the formation of the Sudarshana-chakra Grandsire Bhishma blew

his conch and, raising his arm, ordered the army to manoeuvre into the Sceptre Formation and attack. The Pandavas blew their respective conches The mingled roar of the conches made the fearful horses neigh and the elephants scream The countless tips of swords, arrows, spears and lances gleamed Chariot-wheels clattered The royal flags of different countries flapped The massive rusty portals of heaven squeaked. Swirls of dust blackened the blue sky The leaves of neighbouring trees, the grasses and weeds bent low and trembled Forty lakh soldiers of both armies faced each other, to release their pent-up feelings in gift-showers of arrows Two gigantic oceans pulsated with waves of warriors

I was getting fed up, standing at the door of my tent All my life I had spent as a leader of the Kauravas How could I just stand here now like a stone statue, a mere witness of the battle? Even my suffocating life as the son of a charioteer was never as unbearable as being spectator to the holocaust unfolding before me My steel-like body-frame seemed to be aflame and expanding, my blood-drops seemed to be coursing faster I couldn't stand any longer, so I withdrew inside and sat down Pressing my head with both hands did not stop the pounding The smouldering embers of my thoughts would not die down Sudamana! Shon's severed head! The keeping of my vow! Arjuna's life! But what if Grandsire Bhishma succeeded in killing Arjuna? I would become a vow-violater Upset, I looked at my feet I had not washed them for many days, and the film of dirt showed It hurt my heart, my eyes, my head Outside, the din of the soldiers hammered against my tent My ear-drums were numb Better wild passion than passive conscience! Better to swoon and be captive than live this intolerable life!

"Satyasena!" I shouted with all the strength I could summon

"I await orders, Maharaja " He sped into the tent like an arrow and stood in front of me

' Get me a tumbler of soma-rasa "

"Maharaja, the soma-rasa pots are empty There aren't two drops of soma-wine left " He stood quiet, as always

I had opened my mouth to say something when all on a sudden all the war-peals stopped Silence prevailed Absolute calm, total wordlessness A terrifying peace

"Why, what's happened, Satyasena? Go, see if the Pandavas have surrendered Find out " Forgetting the soma-rasa, I pointed my finger towards the battlefield as I ordered him

Satyasena galloped away. Doubts created whirlwind in my mind. Why this sudden cessation of war-movements? What new developments had taken place? What was going on?

Nearly two hours passed, yet Satyasena did not return. My weary mind stopped whirling the mace of thoughts. A heretic idea came to me—that I should go to the battlefield and find out for myself. But I had made a promise that I would not step into the field of battle until Grandsire Bhishma fell—and this promise began dancing crazily in front of me. I was agonising under an unbearable distress.

"Tap! Tap! Tap! Tap!" At long last, I glimpsed Satyasena's horse from my window. I leapt up and held his reins.

"What's happening, Satyasena? Why have the war-drums stopped? What about the war-plans? Who has surrendered?" I flung arrow after arrow of questions at him.

"Nothing special, Maharaja. Seeing his guru, uncles, maternal uncles, cousins, Grandsire Bhishma and friends in front of him, Arjuna, filled with compassion, let go his Gandiva bow and dismounted from his chariot. He asked Sri Krishna a question—'Isn't it better to go and beg alms at a place of pilgrimage than wage war against one's own relatives?' Sri Krishna must have given him some incomparable advice, which must be why he has re-mounted his chariot. After venerating Grandsire Bhishma and Acharya Drona he has picked up his Gandiva bow." A trail of the sweat he wiped fell on the floor.

Again the din of war-drums, the peals of conches. In an instant the beautiful plain of Kurukshetra was studded with showers of arrows. Clouds of dust ascended to see if the sky's blueness was real or not. Proclamations, roars, screams, peal of war-drums, clattering of chariots—the awesome song wakened the Creator of the Universe.

"Go, Satyasena, and join the battle," I said, entering my tent. He hesitated, knowing I would be left all alone. He had a special, gentle love for me.

"This is an order, Satyasena." With my forefinger I pointed to the battlefield. Like a pellet from a fire-gun, he jumped on his horse and, flicking the reins, he galloped away. I was left there, alone. All around me, silent tents, in front of me, the Jaitra chariot with its yoke lying on the ground, the gold-worked Vijaya-bow, the stately horse Vayujit who had seen me through the world-conquering mission—who else but these would stay back with me?

It was impossible to carry on lingering in the tent The Ganga was too far away Until Grandsire Bhishma fell, I had only the Drishadvati for company, the place for my devotions, for meditation after removing the steel helmet from my head and donning a white robe, for performing the last *arghya*-offerings

Mechanically, my feet turned to the sanctified direction of the Drishadvati The din of the war-drums became fainter and fainter My mind became peaceful, seeking admission into the Kingdom of Light

"Om!
Bhurbhuvah svaha!
Tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo naha prachodayat "
"Om!
I salute that Divine Radiance
May that Divine Radiance
illuminate my mind "

Chanting the Gayatri mantra, I took the cool, pure water of the Drishadvati and poured it back into the sacred river A pure, white radiance intensified everywhere My back felt aglow Like milk setting into curd, the mind, second by second, became secure, firm, and determined

20

Nine days passed Whatever happened each day on the battlefield during this long period, I got to know each evening from Satyasena He raced his brown horse through the fourfold divisions of the army each day and each evening he recounted the events to me in my tent And as the instant cameos appeared in front of my eyes, my whole body burned

Guru Drona, Acharya Kripa, Jayadratha, Ashvatthaman, Shalya, Uncle Shakuni, Jarasandha's brave son Sahadeva, Kritavarma, Brihadbala, Vahlika, Bhagadatta, Bhurishravas, Kshemadhurti, Duryodhana, Duhshasana, and Grandsire Bhishma's maha-chariot-warriors were all fighting on the battlefield, but apart from wiping out the 10,000-strong army of Matsya and Virata they had not been able to hurt the Pandavas at all It was tough going for them—they couldn't show more than their usual feats

Grandsire Bhishma had made even his own guru, Jamadagni's son Parashurama, acknowledge the black taint of defeat, how was it that, as Commander-in-Chief, he was powerless against the Pandavas? Was it due to his old age or Sri Krishna's skilful manoeuvring on the field? No, it was probably because he could not break the tender ties of love. The supple bonds of affection which bind every individual were impossible for him to snap, even if he did happen to be a Kshatriya on a battlefield. Sri Krishna had succeeded in breaking them. But affection continued to tail him like a shadow on the battlefield in the shape of Grandsire Bhishma who considered himself as Sri Krishna's disciple. Love! Love—which at the right time is a profound inspiring force had today, at a crucial time, debilitated even a remarkable warrior like Grandsire Bhishma. This is what was being spread about him every day. He was fighting ambivalently—his mind favouring the Pandavas, his body serving the Kauravas. He had forgotten the example of Sri Krishna killing his own maternal uncle. He had also forgotten the example of his guru Parashurama who had beheaded his own mother Renuka on the command of his father. All his life he had conspired against the Kauravas, and he was continuing his machinations now as well by pitting lakhs and lakhs of Kaurava soldiers against mace-wielding Bhima and arrow-shooting Arjuna. If this is what he had in mind all the time, why hadn't he followed the chief advisor Vidura's example and retired to the Himalayas? I couldn't make out why Grandsire Bhishma was tarnishing his spotless character through this love-weakness. As a Kaurava, Grandsire Bhishma excelled, and he had established himself on the noblest path of all by his life-long, unblemished practice of brahmacharya. But as a Commander-in-Chief? Had he fought openly on the side of the Pandavas, instead of make believing that he was fighting the Pandavas when he was actually destroying the Kauravas, I would have honoured him as a warrior and touched his feet. Whenever the poisonous seeds of war sprouted, he opted for the role of an inglorious neutral in the tragedy and played it till the very last act of the drama.

I had a glimpse of his sense of justice and fair play on various important occasions such as the tournament, for which reason I cherished the deepest respect for him. And that is why my mind kept asking *Why is Grandsire Bhishma doing what he is doing?* The vivid incidents that Satyasena had recounted made me

uneasy My eyes like birds kept pecking at the ceiling of the tent, unable to sleep in the thick darkness of night The daily events on the battlefield were sharply etched on my eyes

In the zealous battles of the very first day, I noticed clearly Kirtivarman pitted against Satyaki, Shalya killing Virata's son Uttara, the fierce fight between Iravan and Shrutayu, Vinda and Anuvinda encircling Kuntibhoja, Jayadratha attacking Drupada, Abhimanyu wounding Brihadbala, Ashvatthaman harassing Shikhandin But that night my mind kept hovering around a single warrior only—Shveta, King of Panchala Fighting on the side of the Pandavas, he had earned the distinction on the first day itself of being an unruffled leader Vexing Grandsire Bhishma with repeated attacks, he killed thousands of Saindhavas, Gandharas, Kalingas and Kulindas The terrified soldiers, shouting "Help! Save me!", rushed to Grandsire Bhishma's chariot for shelter Immediately Grandsire Bhishma confronted Shveta and, severing his fair neck from his trunk, sent him to the realm of the illustrious dead During the evening cessation of hostilities, groups of warriors gathered to look at Shveta's corpse The first day's battle ended with Shveta's noble death

On the second day of battle in the dark fortnight of the month of Margashirsha, Grandsire Bhishma deployed his forces in the Saranga-Bird Formation, to counter which the then Commander-in Chief of the Pandavas, Dhrishtadyumna, arranged his army in the Red Sheldrake Formation Stationing himself in front, he rolled his blood-red eyes left to right searching for Guru Drona who had once routed his father No sooner had the sun arisen than, roaring like a lion, he pounced on Ashvatthaman Shalya grappled with Shankha Grandsire Bhishma blanketed the Panchala army with arrows Abhimanyu attacked Lakshmana Clouds of dust arose Impossible to tell who was who The second day resounded with the thunderous cyclonic movements of Satyaki Toppling Grandsire Bhishma's charioteer, he revealed his Vrishni glory Himalaya-high corpses lay heaped on the field Hills of steel bows, *bastikas*, and lotus-shaped, needle-sharp, cow-eared arrows formed everywhere

The third day of battle in the dark fortnight saw Grandsire Bhishma re-arranging his forces in the Garuda-Bird Formation To frustrate him, Commander in-Chief Arjuna deployed his army in the Half-Moon Array with Bhima protecting the right flank

The clangour of his swordsmen mixed with the clamorous cries of his allies, and till forenoon he wrought cruel havoc in the ranks of the Kauravas. Hundreds of horsemen, chariot-heroes and foot-soldiers of the Kosala, Kekaya, Gandhara, Samshaptakas and Trigarta armies were manoeuvred into action, and it seemed that none had the power to withstand their assault Shouting "Help! Save us!" the fearful Kaurava soldiers ran to Duryodhana for succour Critical of Grandsire Bhishma's cavalier attitude to fighting, Duryodhana rebuked the Commander-in-Chief Infuriated by Duryodhana's piercing taunts, Grandsire Bhishma tore into the Pandava forces with such ferocity that it seemed they would be thrown out of the battlefield itself Seeing this, Krishna, who had vowed he would not wield arms, leapt out of Arjuna's chariot Nandighosha Lifting aloft a stray chariot wheel, he sprinted in the direction of Grandsire Bhishma He had not taken more than ten steps when Arjuna jumped off his chariot and stopped him The third day departed, sowing the black seeds of night on the field, witness to Krishna's violation of his vow Repeatedly I felt I should go and meet Grandsire Bhishma and implore him to continue his massacre But this was not possible How could an *ardha rathi* enter the tent of a maha-chariot-hero, a Commander in Chief?

From the fourth day the darkness deepened Bit by bit, our army waned like the moon in slow eclipse That day's glory belonged to Bhima and Ghatotkacha When infuriated Bhima swelled his ocean-vast body and emitted his lion-roars, even the elephants horripilated Lifting the mace which had been gifted him by Vrishaparvan, he terrorised the elephant ranks, turning the Kaurava beasts on the Kaurava warriors Like torrential rain in the monsoon, he deluged the banks of Kaurava soldiers on either side Shouting "This is not Bhima, it is the god of death Yama", the Kauravas fled helter-skelter Eager to harass the scattering forces further, Ghatotkacha uprooted huge trees to block their flight Thinking *Only one mace wielding hero has the power to withstand Bhima*, all pushed Duryodhana in front to face Bhima They grappled like two maddened elephants Showers of sparks flashed as they clashed Forgetting the battle, the soldiers stared intently at the duellists A stunning blow from Duryodhana near the forehead felled Bhima with a thud, like a Himalayan peak toppling The earth quaked The Kaurava soldiers sent up sky-splitting victory roars for Duryodhana, but—but Bhima, in a flash,

quickly killed Duryodhana's friends and brothers—Shakadeva, Ketuman, Satya, Satyadeva, Senapati, Bhanuman, Jalasandha, Ugra, Virabahu, and Sulochana Like a ravening tiger, rolling his torch-red eyes, he sped through the unresisting fourfold army ranks like a whirlwind, challenging and striking any and everyone With his heavy mace he smashed any number of brave warriors and, quaffing pitcher after pitcher of soma-wine, he danced wildly, shouting "Where is Duhshasana? Where is Duhshasana?"

Our forces gathered in the Makara-Formation on the fifth day of the dark fortnight The Pandavas attacked in the Hawk Formation under Arjuna's command All over the battlefield of Kurukshetra lay mounds of iron goads, sticks, saddles, broken blades, and shattered chariot-wheels Hands, feet, heads, and trunks—hills of these The carnivorous birds of Mainaka hill—vultures, *kukkaras*, *kuraris* and others—descended in hordes on the battlefield The hero of the fifth day was Bhurishravas Packing off Satyaki's ten sons to the abode of Yama he now concentrated on Satyaki himself The duel between Abhimanyu and Lakshmana had proved inconclusive

Grandsire Bhishma must have felt nervous when, on the sixth day, the Kaurava forces in the Saranga-Array came face to face with the massive Makara-Formation of the Pandavas, because mace-wielding Bhima alighted from his chariot in front of Bhishma s very eyes and wrathfully, overturned the chariots, one by one, of Drona, Ashvatthaman and Shalya and, lifting them up, hurled them to a far distance Worried that Bhima's bravado might let him down, Dhrishtadyumna ordered him to stop and return to his own chariot Bhima had struck Duryodhana unconscious The Kauravas were scattering in such panic from the terrifying onslaughts of Dhrishtadyumna, Bhima and Ajuna that Ashvatthaman could not find an opening to remove the unconscious Duryodhana to safety beyond the battlefield

Who could have guessed that, leaving aside the result of the war, Grandsire Bhishma did not have even the simple ability to get the Kaurava to re-form ranks Nothing seemed to be happening, and nothing was apparently going to happen The seventh day also passed The impending shadow of defeat hung heavy not only on my mind but on the minds of all our soldiers Despite the fact that

we had a 25-lakh strong army, and an experienced, 180-year old Commander-in-Chief, the Kauravas were not advancing even an inch. Why? On the night of the eighth day of battle, worried and despondent Uncle Shakuni and Duryodhana turned up at my tent.

"Karna, take up arms. Even Sri Krishna has broken his vow. Come, I will make you Commander-in-Chief, and force Grandsire Bhishma to become an *ardha-rathi* under your command." Each word of Duryodhana clearly betrayed his inner turmoil and desperation. Man has only two options in the face of Death. One is to follow the path of extreme cruelty, the other the path of extreme compromise. Duryodhana had become flexible. Did he think Karna was a horse who could be yoked to a war-chariot however and whenever he wanted?

"King, all will break their promises, the womb of earth will burst open, but Karna will stand by his word. If you really feel that you need my presence as Commander-in-Chief, then go and tell Grandsire Bhishma to throw away his arms and withdraw from battle." I told Duryodhana to do this.

Ten hundred thousand Kaurava soldiers had laid down their lives. Grandsire Bhishma's bloody gamble was still continuing. He had failed to snap the ties of delusion and affection.

I got the impression that Duryodhana went straight from my tent to the tent of Grandsire Bhishma. I could not find out what they discussed but—but it seemed likely that Duryodhana openly asked him to resign as Commander-in-Chief because, on the ninth day, Bhishma deployed his forces in the all-auspicious mystical diagram, the Sarvatobhadra, and spread terror among the Pandavas. By killing the maha-chariot-hero Shatanika, he rekindled the eternal flame of hope. Everyone felt that things would now turn for the better. That night, the tenth of the dark fortnight, the tents of the Kauravas relaxed in the light of the moon. The Dhrishadvati rippled past, red with the blood-waters of the Ganga of the battlefield. Fate hovered, circling ominously. Nine days had passed—so far, so good!

The eleventh day—Krishna Ekadashi—dawned. Unlike the previous days, it was getting colder now. Mist clung to the field. The sky was overcast. It had become routine to hear the sounds of doom at daybreak, and the Dhrishadvati felt something was strangely missing, because an eerie peace prevailed on its banks. I felt a peculiar unease also, because I could not understand how to

believe all that Duryodhana was telling me though he stood right in front of me

"Last night Yudhishthira went to Grandsire Bhishma's tent The main topic of their conversation was Shikhandin " Duryodhana's words numbed me Why should Grandsire Bhishma, as our Commander-in Chief, meet Yudhishthira alone at all? Why did he talk to him for a whole hour? And after all that why did he keep everyone in the dark? What plans did he concoct? What was the connection between him and Shikhandin? Nothing seemed to make sense

"King, I have reached the end of my patience If Grandsire Bhishma cannot rout at least one major Pandava warrior today, he should accept the fact that he's defeated And I will then take up arms If this doesn't happen today then I will return the crown you have given me and, placing it at your feet, I will find my way back to Champanagari I have listened to enough of ten days' din of war drums and weapons from a distance, and now I have become deaf to everything My war-eager steed Vayujit is rusting away useless Dust is gathering on my Jaitra war-chariot, and dust is clouding my fame too Go Tell Grandsire Bhishma that he either opens the floodgates of war or severs Karna's jugular " It was not possible for me to cover up the totality of my desperation as I gave Duryodhana the last message before he proceeded to the battlefield As soon as Duryodhana left in a huff, I yoked Vayujit and four other white horses to my Jaitra chariot It was my earnest desire that I should not fail in my duty to offer a wreath at the samadhi of Shon who all his life had happily shared my joys and sorrows Leaving Kurukshetra and the capital behind, my chariot sped to Shon s memorial situated on the border of the kingdom of Virata The clamour of war drums lay behind me I had to return at all costs by dusk Flanked by two horses each on both sides, Vayujit raced with his tail puffed high, he had always appeared to me to be like Shon My memories of Shon were as white and pure and precious and countless as the hairs on the thick bushy tail of Vayujit As soon as they came into view, the silent stones of Shon's samadhi on the bank of the Yamuna seemed to lift their hands and speak to me 'Come, Vasu-bhaiya This cruel and unjust world never really understood you And it never will Tell me everything, whatever you want to say Do you think that this charioteer will not be able to keep his joys and sorrows to himself?

Had I been living, then, O son of the Sun God, I would gladly have taken charge of your chariot's reins I would have encased you in your steel armour But what's happening is the opposite—you are placing flowers on me Why have you brought this wreath? Elder does not offer flowers in homage to younger "

They were silent like me—the deep, serene flow of the Ganga, and his samadhi But I could experience a meaningful communion

Washing my face and hands in the pure, clean water of the Yamuna, I placed the wreath on the samadhi, and instantly felt a peace come over me As I gazed at the water, a stray remark of Ashvatthaman came to my mind, "Life is a river that flows on the bed of birth and death "

"I have to leave you, Shon " I knelt and paid my homage at the samadhi With the rays of the setting sun caressing his back, Vayujit sped back to Kurukshetra I had no worries now There was nothing to block my path There was no reason to turn back That entire day passed in riding to and from the samadhi My chariot halted in front of my tent just when the war-trumpets were sounding the cessation of the day's battle How tranquil everything appeared! I could not see any soldiers generously discussing each other's exploits while returning to their tents Why such an eerie, frightening silence? The battle was over, but why were no soldiers returning? What had happened? My mind was flooded with misgivings even as I unharnessed Vayujit

A sandpiper shrilled harshly and skittered across the bank of the *Drishadvati* I was intrigued by its shriek The shades of dusk were becoming hazy and obscure The dense dark of the eleventh day of the dark fortnight engulfed the tents of both camps Even the torches could not reduce the darkness

It was one hour after sunset—and why had Satyasena still not returned to the tent? Had he become a fatal target in today's battle? The flap of the tent-door, worn out through constant rolling and unrolling, was on the verge of falling apart My eyes tired trying to pierce through the pitch dark that enveloped Kurukshetra What was going on? What had happened today? Finally, I heard the tapping of hooves But the beat was not the normal rhythm of the hooves of Satyasena's horse The gait was irregular

"Maharaja, Grandsire Bhishma has fallen," he said as he clumsily dismounted from his horse and approached me

I felt as if the Himalayas had cracked and burst "Who did such an incredible deed?" I shouted as I shook his shoulders

"Arjuna He placed the eunuch Shikhandin in front Grandsire Bhishma is in great pain All have met him, paid homage, and departed But his eyes seem to be awaiting someone and and " he said even as he stumbled and nearly fell

"And what, Satyasena?"

"And our Bhanusena is dead They have kept his corpse waiting for you to come and perform the last rite of lighting the pyre " Averting his face, he wiped his eyes with a corner of his shawl

"Bhanusena gone? Go, Satyasena, light his pyre I leave it to all of you Don't wait for me "

Mounting Vayujit, I galloped off in the direction of the battlefield My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts Darkness everywhere Grandsire Bhishma toppled The sceptre of the Kauravas fallen I had had differences with him He never treated me as anything more than a charioteer In his eyes, I was no better than an *ardha rathi* Why then did I feel for *him*? Was I deceiving myself? No, no Why did I have this ego problem when it came to meeting an injured warrior on the brink of death? How did the question of shame or glory enter here? How could there be a difference of opinion here? It was only a matter of time before that grand old man left us Should I go on secretly finding fault with him? Others might do just that—but not Karna I must meet him A son's obsequies could wait

As if reading my mind, Vayujit halted by himself near a tent where a huge crowd had gathered The flaming torches, instead of scattering the dark, only intensified it A horde of sad-faced soldiers had assembled to get a darshan of their dying Commander-in Chief That brave hero who slept on luxurious beds in the palace now lay on a bed of sharp arrows A few dry twigs had stuck in his white beard The impressive crown on his head was conspicuously missing The *bastika* arrows that had pierced his body had not been removed Dark circles had formed round his eyes The grass under his body was blessed, made pure, as it were A Brahmin named Shampaka cradled his head in his lap He had full faith in Shampaka

"Mighty-armed Bhishma!" By the time I realised that in my emotional confusion I had uttered "Bhishma" instead of "Grandsire' , the word had reached his ears I could not retract it now

His piercing eyes, hidden behind wrinkled eyelids, half opened

His long lips quivered and made indistinct sounds Once again from that old, tired, worn-out body lying on its death-bed emerged that striking tone—a tone like that of an arrow striking a stone—with deep emotion, with deep affection

"Who? Karna! Come near me, here" With both hands he waved away the soldiers and attendants No one remained near, except the wheezily burning torches Even Shampaka left, letting go of the Grandsire's head

"Yes It is Karna Karna, son of a charioteer How can *I* come near *you*? And why?" It was my ego-horse snorting

"Karna, who's charioteer? Who's Kshatriya? All wrong, all false Come near me—no, very close *Arre*, obey me as a soldier obeys even a fallen commander"

I approached him, like the high Himalayas and beside them the horizontal Vindhya range Such a sweet tone—I had never experienced such affection before All his life he had embraced truth, now with a similar affection he stretched out a hand and pulled me into his arms A thrill of horripilation ran through my body. This was the third divine unforgettable touch in my life

"Karna, you are not a charioteer's son You are the eldest son of the Queen Mother Kunti" In the brief pause I could hear distinctly the wheezing of the flickering torches He was under the impression that the truth he had spoken was being heard by me for the first time The relationship did not mean much to me any more "I am not a charioteer's son—not Kunti's son—not even the Sun-God's son—I am just a living being—ready to face with determination anything that happens to me" That was my only belief

"What's the matter? Doesn't this news affect you in any way?" As he spoke, the arrows embedded in his chest heaved slightly

"It doesn't I am aware of this fact"

"That means—that means your mind must be filled with bitterness and anger against me for the disrespect and insult I heaped on you so often—but, my son, that is not so *Arre*, it was never my intention to belittle you The real reason for my addressing you as *ardha-rathi* and so preventing you from entering the battlefield was to ensure that you did not slaughter your own brothers, since you were not aware of the relationship The mind of an old man is like an anvil His head accepts molten steel, as well as sledge-hammer blows But all the world hears is the thud of hammer on steel The anvil itself remains inert, unaffected That is what it's

made for It's good you've come to meet me Remove whatever misgivings you have about me You are not an *ardha-rathi*, you are the finest of maha-chariot-heroes " He paused, racked by death-like agony

Sighing heavily, he opened his eyes

"Grandsire!" I choked I was unable to go on

"Karna, who can forget the fact that you singlehanded routed the kings from various lands who pounced on Duryodhana who had abducted Bhanumati in the kingdom of Kashi? Not just the Magadhans, but I was astounded by the way you forced Jarasandha to lick the dust The victory drums of your world-conquest are still ringing in my ears You are superior to Arjuna in strength and in the use of weapons Son of Kunti, it is certain that the philosophy which has guided your conduct and behaviour over the last seventy years is such as to make even Yudhishthira bow his head Your arm-grip is powerful enough to crush even Bhima Son, you are truly as illustrious as Sri Krishna Go and join your brothers Go and fall at the feet of your mother Kunti Devi, who has seen nothing but sorrows in her life, who even as Queen Mother has had to live the harsh life of an ascetic, whose bird-eyes all her life have fluttered expectantly for a glimpse of you, and whose heart has always silently grieved for you Let my death be the beginning of the end of this cosmic fire of enmity and destruction With you gone, Duryodhana will be as helpless as a string-snapped bow And this war, which will pointlessly consume lakhs and lakhs of lives, will come to an end Go to the Pandavas " The corners of his eyes were brimming with tears His hand on my back trembled The arrows embedded in his chest shook Waves of delusion distracting me from the performance of my duty once again hemmed me in It was essential that a firm stand be taken

' Grandsire, Sri Krishna placed exactly such a proposal in front of me in the same emotion-charged language, as a clever political ploy The Queen Mother attracted me with exactly such a lure—so that her sons never need fear me And you have presented the same proposal to me in very sincere terms The fact that you are telling me this while lying on you death-bed shows how much you love me But—but I have lost my way And I have no choice but to proceed on that path Like Sri Krishna to the Pandavas, I will become the saviour of the Kauravas I have placed my wealth, my body, my faithful retinue, and my fame in the service of

Duryodhana Like wind harassing fire, I will harass the Pandavas including Arjuna You must excuse me, and please do not entrap me in any massive snare of delusion If you wish to give me something, grant me your blessings "

"You are blessed, Karna You are the only one deserving to be called Kunti's first-born Go, give up feelings of enmity and pick up your bow as the Commander-in-Chief of the Kauravas Lead the Kaurava army as a true Kshatriya, not blinded by anything Your noble innermost self will obtain the magnificent realm of the gods Go with my blessings, which are with you always " Tears fell from his Himalayan eyes, drenching his bed of arrows His arrows seemed to be piercing me

As I rose and touched his feet, and did *pradakshina*, my mind-jar, till now so steady, cracked There was nothing lasting, nothing permanent in the world if Death could overpower even so great a truth-speaker as Grandsire Bhishma who practised such intense brahmacharya Why had Arjuna, who had once played on the old man's knee, a man comparable to one's own father, turned him into a block of wood lying on a bed of arrows?

My tear drops like pearls fell at his sacred feet His lifted hand blessed me "May victory be yours, Karna!" The Commander-in-Chief who all his life had offered *arghya* to the Sun-God, who kept a firm will in an aging body, had the power to keep death at bay till the Sun arrived at its summer solstice *Nothing should obstruct his final* sadhana—thinking so, I returned to my tent The torches all around were flaming brightly Crickets shrilled in the thick darkness

Somewhere, in the obscure distant corner of my body, a string of my mind s veena strummed I had not obtained the blessing of Radha mata I had had no opportunity to touch the feet of my father Nor had I met Vrishali I had no news of Supriya Only Vrishaketu remained in the palace Impossible to imagine what he must be thinking The sudden events following the selection of the Commander-in-Chief prevented me from stepping into the capital How would I be able to meet all of them? Tomorrow itself was the day I was entering the battle

21

Satyasena, who had gone to perform the last rites of Bhanusena,

had not returned. I was sure that my son's atman would not be angry with me, even though I had not personally performed the rites. Brave Bhanusena, who perished as a hero on the battlefield, was not even aware that the person who had killed him, Bhima, was his own uncle. Well, unknowingly though it was, Bhima was responsible for my son's sacrifice on the field. Even the last few seeds of shraddha, love and kinship in my heart had been reduced to ashes by that act. My mind was bereft of feeling, my body numb. Occasionally I glimpsed Grandsire Bhishma's mutilated body on the screen of my tent. "Give up feelings of enmity, and fight—discard your arrogance, and lead the army." His last words danced in front of my eyes. Eyes closed, I sat on a seat whose softness felt thorny to me.

"Maharaja, look who has come to see you!" Satyasena had slipped in like a whiff of wind, I had no idea when.

"Go, Satyasena. No one but Death now can come to meet Karna. I don't wish to meet anyone, with the exception of Arjuna on the battlefield." With intense anguish I lifted my finger and pointedly showed Satyasena the way out.

"No, Maharaja. If you see who is waiting to meet you, you will even refuse Death a temporary admission. Vrishali is standing outside."

Was Satyasena doing his duty as a brother, was he as one of the family arranging a reunion between husband and wife, or was he trying to be *a dutiful soldier who had to know the mind of* his Commander-in-Chief on the eve of battle? Why was everyone around me without reason showering me with such love and affection? Did I deserve all that?

"Vrishali? What's the idea of keeping her waiting outside, Satyasena?" I glanced out of the tent as I chided him.

"She says that it would not be proper for her to enter because it is not proper for the wives of soldiers to enter their tents on the eve of battle, and what would the soldiers think if they saw the Commander-in-Chief's wife inside his tent? She wants to know how her husband will explain this. That is why she prefers to stand outside. She is yearning for a darshan of you, Maharaj. I also desire it. That is why, despite the pitch darkness, I have brought her with me from Hastinapura. You see, I am after all her brother." His face seemed to pale. Each word of his came out, as it were, a prayer.

"Come " I followed him outside My wife stood there, in the dim light of the torches I surmised that Satyasena had not broken the news of Bhanusena's death to her, that was the reason surely for her composure Was my life's partner going to fight by my side on the field of battle?

"Come inside, Vrishali "

"Maharaja!" She hesitated

"Come in, Vrishali Your entering will not upset any Kaurava soldier Society doesn't care one broken cowrie for the ideals that I had cherished so deeply in my heart—and what kind of ideal is this that you are setting? Why are you hesitating? Come in " Adjusting the veil around her head, she set foot in the tent Had I so wished, she would have entered even a blazing fire

"Are you alone, Vrishali?" I did not know what else to say

"Father and mother are so feeble they can't come here Vrishaketu is mourning Bhanusena, so Supriya has stayed back to console him, on my instructions "

"So you know of his death Who told you?"

How could she be so calm even after Bhanusena's death? She was the wife of Karna—how excellently she lived up to that dignified status!

"Satyasena-bhaiya And—and everyone knows you didn't even go for his last rites "

She lowered her head with the weight of grief, and wiped her eyes with the end of her veil

"Vrishali " I did not know what to say

"I know, Maharaja Your life has been wasted marrying a low-caste charioteer's daughter But how did you manage to forget your father and mother? Why did it never strike you to have their darshan at least? Why did you not come to the capital?"

"Who who informed you I am not a charioteer?"

"The Queen Mother Kunti Devi Anyone else would have accepted the promise you made on the bank of the Ganga, and returned assured, but she came to meet me, only because "

"Because "

"Because she is still yearning for you, that's why. Because as a wife I should also discuss it with you Maharaja, her love for you is boundless If not for us, at least for her sake you should stop the war."

"Vrishali, do you also feel that marrying you has been a waste of

my life? No, no, no It's for your sake I refused Sri Krishna, for your sake I sent back the Queen Mother, for your sake I did not fulfil the Grandsire's last wishes I was a charioteer, and that is what I still am, today Not because I have to, but proudly I will declare to all that I am the son of Radha-mata and venerable Adhiratha, and if you wait till morning I will state in your presence to the rising Sun-God that "

"What?"

"That if I could get a wife like Vrishali, I would prefer to be a charioteer's son not for one birth only but for hundreds of re-births But but don't bring in the war That cannot now be stopped "

"Maharaja, ever since the Queen Mother met me, for the last fifteen days I have offered the flowers of my tears before the shard of the pot, clutching this hope in my heart You belong to us; please don't leave us and go " Her round, fair, lotus-like face was drenched with tears She stepped forward, stooped, and touched my feet My heart filled with waves of pride, love and communion

"Rise, Vrishali Have you ever heard anyone in the city say that Maharaja Shantanu deserted his fish-fragrant wife Satyavati? Has anyone ever suggested to you that Maharaja Yayati spurned Sharmishtha? I have grown up in that same city, in that very palace A husband and a wife are two bodies with one soul, united from previous births Neither society nor dharma nor politics can separate them False prestige cannot break that pure bond Rise Don't worry Go to the city and, if you can, give half of that shard to Supriya You are the wise one, the elder one Rise " With trembling hands I raised her by the arms Like a creeper twining round a tree, she clung tightly to me Caressing her thick wavy hair, my hand seemed to be saying, "Vrishali, if I return alive, there is the bank of the Ganga, the waves of the Yamuna, if I don't, we will meet on the banks of the Ganga in heaven "

"Grant me leave to go " She removed from the end of her shawl the finger-protector that Queen Mother Kunti Devi had given her on our wedding, and slipped it on my right thumb She was wearing a blue silk, gold-dotted sari chosen both from the presents given by the Queen Mother

"You may leave And inform Radha-mata that before sunrise tomorrow I will come to the palace for her darshan and her blessing,' I said Adjusting her shawl tightly on her head, she moved

aside the woven screen, and left I could clearly see, in the light of the torch, the eyes of Satyasena, who was standing outside, glow with happiness Holding aloft a torch in one hand, he nimbly climbed into the chariot No sooner had Vrishali sat in the chariot than he flicked the reins A fine-wire nuance of awareness strummed within me though a husband, I had forgotten a fundamental norm of tradition

"Wait, Satyasena," I stopped him by raising my arm from the door of the tent "I completely forgot to give Vrishali what must be given " Holding a sharp snake-arrow in one hand, I ran to the chariot Both looked on, astounded

"Vrishali, the auspicious sign of a married woman "

I snicked the sharp arrow-point on my left thumb, and with my right thumb I smeared the blood drop on her broad forehead How beautiful she looked with that vermilion tilak! How pure! There are those who say that Karna made a mistake by gifting his flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour to Indra—but how will these people understand that had I possessed the impenetrable skin-armour I would have been deprived of the good fortune of being able to apply the auspicious tilak on Vrishali's forehead?

Satyasena jerked the reins As the horses sped forward, the flaming torch in his hand flickered on the road to Hastinapura I kept staring till it disappeared in a distant bend

22

There was only one choice left for me in the impending war—to fight, in accordance with the tradition, in order to obtain fame To fight for the Kauravas—for the land of the Kauravas

I could not make out who had cheated me What Duryodhana had done all this long time over these years—even if I mentioned it all to anyone, I would not be believed Uncle Shakuni, Duhshasana, Maharaja Dhritarashtra—the great war was not being fought by any of these royal characters I and only I, had to fight this war, with whatever weapons lay to hand, with whatever could be used as a weapon That would establish my Karna-hood That would give prestige to my upbringing, to the Kauravas, and to the land of the Kauravas

This land! Who knows how many great sacrifices had been made by how many for this land How many brave warriors, how many

boys and girls men and women had smilingly offered their lotus-lives in the great *yajna* performed to protect the throne of Hastinapura I had to fight tomorrow in order to show my solidarity with all those souls who were wandering in the surroundings I had in the nick of time suppressed the stormy emotions that raged in my heart If I hadn't if I hadn't, I do not myself know what would have happened

It was essential to stop the life-long confusion of a traveller lost in a forest

With a calm mind, I arrived at a single clear purpose, and dropped off to sleep

BOOK 9

SRI KRISHNA

1

I knew that war would never be the final solution. War doesn't resolve conflicts, war doesn't solve problems. In fact, war's bloody massacres generate a terrible fear that mankind may lose all sense of humanity. The danger is that society may collapse altogether. The cultural foundations of a country are imperilled. The fear is that the enchanting dreams that mankind has cherished generation after generation will shatter. When we are seeking life's central purpose our minds can get overpowered by black doubts and confusions. And yet I had gone ahead and ignited this great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. I had started a massive *yajna* that would consume lakhs and lakhs of soldiers. I had begun a mind-blowing game that would unleash the venom dormant in every person. I had sparked off a horrendous confrontation and clash of the particles that energise the universe. Why? Because I was some sort of stone-hearted murderer? Did I desire the destruction of all living creatures in the world? Did I want the whole of Aryavarta to be shrouded with cruelty, disrespect, anarchy, and selfishness? Certainly not.

I lit the fire of the war, I was the one who exhorted back to battle dry-throated Arjuna when, paralysed by compassion for his relatives, he flung aside his Gandiva bow. I took the reins of his Nandighosha chariot in order to guide his horses. On the third day of the war I violated my promise not to wield arms in battle, but that did not worry me. Why did I do all this? What was my motive? Only to punish Duryodhana and Duhshasana for so grossly insulting pure-charactered Draupadi? To uproot once and for all the wicked political intrigues of Uncle Shakuni? To expose the sweet but ineffective "non-alignment" of Bhishma and Drona? To apply the glossy collyrium of truth in the unseeing eyes of Dhritarashtra? To show the path to heaven to misguided, lost and perpetually confused Karna? No. This would have been easy enough. I would have made special efforts to achieve special results. Nor was it a question of establishing two separate kingdoms.

The problem facing me was simple—it concerned all mankind The problem was one of ultimate and eternal truth The problem concerned the immortal souls of all manner of life, the entire multitudinosity of creation

The one never-changing and ultimate truth of life is immortal, radiant consciousness, which you can never experience by cooping yourself up in the voluptuous dissipations of palace-pleasures By clinging to impure attachments, like a crocodile clutching at an elephant in a river, one never tastes that consciousness For that, every vein in our body must deeply and unequivocally realise that, just as night succeeds day, death inevitably succeeds life The heart, the mind, the body—all must become conscious of the soul Then there is no need for any other person to tell us what is the truth, and to prove it Truth then emanates from every body by itself Salvation and supreme enlightenment are not obtained by going around with a begging bowl You don't quench your hunger by watching another eat You don't slake your thirst by watching another drink Similarly, just advice from another is not going to bring about one's own salvation Wherever there is life—that's where the Soul is—and that's where the Soul struggles for salvation You cannot see this from the outside, but this is what's happening all the time The meaning of life is self-manifestation

Occasionally, mankind faces the prospect of annihilation of all manifestation This happens when mankind, violating scriptures, moral advice, and basic social norms, drowns itself in self-indulgence This happens when it does not have time to see that beyond the world of the sense is another subtle level of experience Then mankind has to mark time, and nothing then seems to work except war That was the only reason I lit the fire of war

2

Ten days had passed The horrors of the carnage kept increasing The din was terrifying I saw all this as I held the reins in the Nandighosha chariot of my life-precious disciple Arjuna and manoeuvred the pure-white horses through the four-fold army divisions I had joined the Pandavas as their charioteer in order to help them, and as I observed the massacre going on in Kurukshetra I was sure that the Pandavas were going to win Because because to the Pandavas, including Arjuna, Karna, the son of the

Sun-God, was an infinitely heroic, Kala-like bringer of doom like Death himself, and he was not going to enter the battle until Bhishma fell. There was no leader in the Kaurava ranks to equal Karna, who had purified himself by continuous sadhana, who was eminently efficient, and who radiated heroic splendour. So out of the goodness of my heart I went to Hastinapura and, explaining his divine birth to him, I did all I could to win him over to the side of the Pandavas. But even I, who wield the Sudarshana chakra, failed to swerve that ocean-powerful will of his. While returning from Hastinapura, I wondered if my speaking the truth would in any way dent his determination. But no, that was impossible. For he had proved in his life that only that person breaks who has no lustre, no magnificence. In fact, his reaction when he realised that he was the Sun-God's son astonished everyone. Vidura informed me that, after his meeting with me, Karna returned shouting "I am the Sun-God's son! I am the Sun-God's son!" and, embracing five golden water pitchers, he overturned them. That same Karna had vowed not to set foot on the battleground until Bhishma fell. Indra had very cleverly deprived Karna of his skin-armour and flesh-earrings for the sake of his son Arjuna. Parashurama had cast a nerve-shattering curse on him: "The Brahma-missile will fail you at the critical time in battle." The Brahmin's ejaculation on Mahendra hill, "The earth will drag your chariot wheel down in battle exactly like this," was not something anyone could forget. He had given Kunti Devi his word that he would not harm four of her sons. Though he was the Sun-God's son, the first Pandava Karna's role in battle was the same as mine: we were both chariot-drivers.

But was this the whole truth?

The eleventh day of battle dawned. Flying the triangular royal flag of the Kauravas, Guru Drona, leader of the Kaurava hosts, faced me grimly on the field. Drona! Drona was truly a master of all weapons and war-skills. Seeing Bhishma fall on the tenth day of battle, the decimated Kaurava soldiers lost heart but, seeing Drona installed as their new Commander-in-Chief, they regrouped with fresh enthusiasm and raised vociferous war-cries. The surroundings of Kurukshetra rang with their resurgent sky-rending shouts.

Today was the first time Karna, under the command of Drona, entered the field at the head of a huge chariot-force. He stood in his Jaitra chariot which was decked with creepers and tendrils and

ornamented with glittering gold-work, and his impressive tall figure made him stand out like Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas. His ochre war-flag fluttered on his chariot pole linked fast by elephant-chains, it flapped with such intensity that the golden pole swayed with it. And Karna, encased completely in armour, looked like a flaming, ash-covered ember. He was bereft of skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings, there was a curse on his head, but he could burn like fire. A fiery spark, no matter how small, is still a fiery spark. I knew only too well that it would be foolhardy to confront Arjuna with a fresh and energetic Karna. In fact, in the meeting inside the tent last night, Yudhishthira had asked repeatedly, fearfully, "What about that son of Radha, that charioteer's off-spring?" and I had explained that if Karna, who had endured so much agony all his life and whose honour had been so bitterly insulted, were to meet Arjuna on the field, he would pulverise Arjuna with the ease of a whirlwind reducing a thatched hut to shreds in seconds. Only one person could check him—and that was mountainous Bhima. That was why we unanimously decided to pit Bhima against Karna at the outset. No matter how wrathful, word-honouring Karna would never forget the promise he had made to Kunti Devi. He would not kill Bhima. He would not fatally attack anyone except Arjuna. Now the valiant one was no better than a fangless snake or a clawless lion.

During the period that Bhishma was Commander-in-Chief, the chariot duels, the stone-hurling and other encounters were so fierce that 500,000 Pandava-warriors perished. Bhima, Shveta, Satyaki, Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna and Yuyudhana despatched 1,000,000 Kaurava warriors to the abode of Yama. Still the Kaurava army exceeded the Pandava. With Karna and Drona as leaders the Kauravas numbered an endlessly surging oceanic force of 1,500,000. We had 1,000,000 soldiers arrayed behind the Nandighosha chariot.

As the day dawned, Karna placed his heavy, magnificent, shoulder-high, golden, variously-decorated Vijaya bow in his chariot, then, lifting it high, he waved it in front of his army. His red veins, as thick as horses' reins, swelled as he picked up his huge, white conch Hiranyagarbha and blew into it loudly. The sky-piercing reverberations of that conch excelled all others. It was as if he was announcing before his thousand-rayed father, the Sun-God, "Like your arrowy rays annihilating the darkness, my deadly

naracha, snake-tongued, gold-feathered, needle-sharp, vicious, elephant-heavy, conch-shaped, *chandrapatti*, *grighapatra* and other arrows will wipe out Arjuna today I will see that the elephant symbol on my war-flag tramples the monkey on his!' Blowing again on his Hiranyagarbha conch a peal that made the soldiers horripilate, he urged his massive chariot-force forward His light blue eyes turned dark blue in anger Forgetting that Drona was the Commander-in-Chief the maha chariot-heroes behind him sent up incessant shouts of "Victory! Victory! Victory!" Seeing the first-born Pandava like the Nishadha mountain ringed with submarine flames, not just every Pandava soldier but I as well wondered if the Sun himself had taken another form and appeared among us on his swift, white-horsed chariot Like the ocean roaring on the full-moon night of Purnamasi, he roared, lifting his bow In a flash he had penetrated the ranks of the Pandavas, with the ease of a crocodile slicing through river waters His angry eyes were searching solely for Arjuna's banner But Bhima covered Arjuna every time, and presented himself before Karna Skilfully I manoeuvred Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot away from Karna and halted it in front of Drona

The two faced each other—the hero who single-charioted subdued all Aryavarta in his world-conquering mission, the first-born son of Kunti whose complexion shone with a holy lustre gained through charity, *tapasya*, fortitude, and inner purity, and puissant Bhima who had killed such huge-bodied adversaries as Bakasura, Hidimba, and Jarasandha They sized each other up briefly before pouncing like two maddened wild elephants And the blood-curdling duel began Arrow clashed against arrow Breathing heavily like two roused snakes, they oon shrouded the sky with thick arrowy showers Descending like endless torrential rains from the Mriga constellation, Karna's arrows sped from his bow and harassed the allies of Bhima, among them Virata, Matsya and Panchala Like the afternoon sun oppressing the desert sands, Karna's flaming arrows consumed the Pandava forces So infuriated was arrow-harassed Bhima that he downed pitcher after pitcher of wine in an attempt to inject passion in every drop of his blood Rolling his eyes, which were flaming crimson like the *gunja*-flower, he attacked Karna with such ferocity that he sliced the string of Karna's Vijaya bow eight times in quick succession Five times he uncharioted Karna, wounding Karna's charioteer

Satyasena As soon as Satyasena toppled from the chariot, Karna flung away his bow Cradling Satyasena's trembling head in his lap, he tried reviving him by calling out "Satyasena! Satyasena!" In the meantime Bhima leapt from his chariot into Karna's and pulverised it Satyasena was incapacitated, but Karna continued to battle with complete composure, keeping in mind the word he had given his mother and adopting only a defensive posture against Bhima But Karna could not control himself when the influence of the wine transformed Bhima into a raging ocean storm His blue eyes turned red with anger He scorched whatever came in front of him, like the blistering heat of the sun in month of Vaishakha, and rained deadly arrows upon Bhima with such incessant speed that Bhima was obscured in no time, like thick fog suddenly darkening the Ganga With needle-arrows sticking all over his body, Bhima fell from his chariot with a thud, like a giant sal-tree toppled by a storm The earth shuddered Bhima, son of the wind-god Vayu, lay unconscious Unbeaten Bhima, who even in sleep never showed his back to the earth, sprawled now on his earth-bed

Sparks of victory-joy flashing from his eyes, Karna leapt from his chariot and sprinted towards the inert form of Bhima None had power to stop him

Quickly Bhima recovered consciousness, and, blinking his blood shot eyes, tried to rise Using his bow-string as a noose, round Bhima's neck, Karna jerked hard, the same Karna whom he had in the tournament insulted as "Son of a charioteer" now mocked him, shouting, '*Arre*, you speaker of gibberish! Shall I flay your proud back with my whip? Go! Run from my sight! Go to a kitchen where there's heaps of food, and put your lapping tongue to good use there! And never again dare to face Karna! Go! Go!'

Humiliated, head bowed, Bhima left, granted life by large-hearted Karna This was the first ever blow to Bhima's pride

It was with great difficulty that the corpses of Duryodhana's brothers, Durmukha, Durjaya, Vikarna, all slain by Bhima, were removed by the Kauravas from the battlefield As he was on the point of killing Vikarna, the scene of Draupadi's disrobing after the gambling match swam before Bhima s eyes Alighting from his chariot, he removed his crown and paid homage to Vikarna's lifeless body Harassed by Karna's remarkable feats, Yudhishthira was ready to start negotiations to end the war The eleventh day

dawned with the humbling of Bhima's self-importance. There was no sleep for Yudhishthira as he lay in his tent On the twelfth day, master-of-strategies Drona arranged his force in the Conch Formation and, rallying his soldiers, at the very start of battle, sent Chekitana, Dridhasena, Purujit, Yugandhara, Dhvajaketu, Viraketu, Vrika, Shankha, Maniman, Suchitra, Anshuman, and the mighty Raja Drupada to the realm of Yama But because he loved Arjuna, the guru battled only half-heartedly with his disciple His zeal was flagging When all's said, love is often a frail feeling

Arjuna succeeded in unchariotıng Achala, Ugramanyu, Dirghayu, Vashta, Saushruti and other famous chariot-heroes Satyaki pursued Ashvatthaman, Duhshasana and Shakuni When two massive boulders collide, countless colonies of ants and insects crawling on them get crushed, similarly, innumerable soldiers from each of the four-fold army divisions perished on the field Trampled by elephants, horses and chariots in the bedlam of battle, they died, so many, screaming in agony Chopped off elephants' trunks, human hands, feet and crowned heads heaped the field

Karna roamed the field like a roused, angry lion, looking for Arjuna among the four-fold divisions But I was holding the reins of Arjuna's chariot Always keeping an eye on Karna's war-flag with its strongly-fettered pole, I cleverly swerved Arjuna's chariot in the opposite direction Anyone could see, from the way he had spared Bhima's life, how lethal his war-skill was Frustrated because he could not locate Arjuna, Karna let loose his wrath on Yudhishthira, Nakula and Sahadeva, repeatedly unchariotıng them, repeatedly throwing his bow around their necks, his eyes shooting fire, he asked them in desperation, "Tell me, tell me, where is that blue skinned snake who stung my Sudamana and Shon?" The chariotless Pandavas, embarrassed, swallowing their humiliation, slunk away without saying a word Bound by his word to the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, the son of the Sun-God, breathing heavily, began persecuting the armies of Panchala, Virata, Matsya, Rakshasa and others, mowing them down like on a reaper's sickle at harvest-time Slicing them at will, he flashed across the field like a streak of lightning On one occasion he made Yudhishthira unconscious and hurled his chariot far across the field The soldiers carried Yudhishthira away and revived him

Karna burst on all like a cataclysmic explosion from a sixty-year-old pent-up volcano He was a roaring mass of destruction Nothing could withstand him And so the twelfth day passed So choked with corpses was the field that a new site of battle had to be chosen daily

Seeing that no Pandava had perished yet, that night Duryodhana put aside all regard for protocol and courtesy, and berated Commander-in-Chief Drona, "Twelve days have passed, and twelve lakhs of our soldiers have died, but not a single Pandava! Bhima has slaughtered twentyfour of my brothers, but not one Pandava has perished Is this a war, or a feast-offering before a world-conquering army? Gurudeva Drona, if for any reason your bow is unable to kill the Pandavas, be so good as to transfer the war-flag to the chariot of Karna from tomorrow " Each word stabbed Drona's heart Not a single one of the Kauravas and Pandavas whom he had so diligently trained in the use of war-weapons was concerned with his feelings Pitiless Kala, the World Time-Spirit, had proved that Guru Drona had only one true disciple—dark-skinned but white-souled Ekalavya of the Nishadha mountain tribe, dressed in tree-bark, who had cut off his thumb and offered it to Drona Dedication and sacrifice are always superior to social conformism

Stuffing everyone's love for him in the vast hollow of his quiver, Guru Drona stood up, determined His white beard shook

"I make this promise to Duryodhana who has cast doubts on my ability—tomorrow's sun will not set without witnessing the death of one illustrious Pandava or other in the Chakravyuha battle-formation," saying this he stalked out of the meeting

3

Our spy reported to us exactly what happened at that assembly Arjuna and the others were deeply upset Chakravyuha! The most intricate of all battle-formations! Who should be appointed Commander-in-Chief for tomorrow? Who was capable of piercing the Chakravyuha? Silently I listened for a while to what the troubled Pandavas said All were in favour of giving the command to Bhima Bhima was a brilliant warrior but by no means the type to slice through the Chakravyuha I sent an attendant to summon Abhimanyu As soon as he entered, I exclaimed, "Abhi!"

Arjuna's son knew immediately from my affectionately addressing him as "Abhi" and not "Abhimanyu" that I had something special to tell him Below his sharp nose, through his long lips, flashed the meteor-like smile of white teeth He stepped forward, offered me the usual respect, and said softly, "Yes, uncle?'

Seeing his gentleness and his mature conduct, sure signs of the blood of the Yadavas and the Pandavas, indecision overcame me—for this was the sixteen-year old youth, hardly one year married, whom we were going to pawn in tomorrow s battle I did not know what to say

Seeing all silent, he said, "Why are you silent? So troubled?"

"Guru Drona is ordering the impregnable Chakravyuha formation tomorrow To pierce that—"

I was unable to speak frankly to him I could not put aside the sweet face of his pregnant wife Uttara which kept floating in front of my eyes

"If that is my responsibility, I shall consider it an honour I accept it gladly, with the blessings of all present " Offering his respects to all, not wishing to show discourtesy to elders and superiors by sitting in their midst, Subhadra's son Abhimanyu walked out of the tent with the stately gait of a horse returning from a bath in the Yamuna's waters There was a lump in everyone's throat There was no other warrior so young on the battle field The fourteenth day of the dark fortnight dawned—the thirteenth day of battle No sooner had the sun risen than Guru Drona, emerging from his tent ordered his troops to form the Circular Labyrinth of the Chakravyuha in the hazy light He positioned himself at the head—like a lion at the entrance of a cave

Looking like a second Arjuna, Abhimanyu announced his assumption of leadership by blowing loudly on his conch The army marched, with Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and Yuyudhana assigned to protect Abhimanyu

Slowly, steadily, as if peeling a *kandarpa*, one by one Abhimanyu's ranks sliced their way into the Kaurava array Wounding Drona, Shakuni, Duhshasana, Kritavarman, Kripa, Ashvatthaman, Duryodhana and others, he shattered rank upon rank of the Kaurava forces He slithered inside the Kaurava formation like a snake gliding inside a hole Bhima trailed close behind, but the distance between him and Abhimanyu kept

widening Nimble-armed, brimming-with-zeal, forgetting-his-own-safety Abhimanyu did not so much as once look back, his sole aim was to shoot into the heart of the Chakravyuha with the swiftness of an arrow Killing thousands of chariot-heroes, elephant-warriors, horse-riders and others, he succeeded single-handed in cutting his way through seven defence-formations, and found himself in the centre of the eighth Surrounding him, on all sides, stood lakhs and lakhs of Kaurava soldiers Fighting singly, undaunted, he unchărioted Shatrunjaya, Takshaka, Satyashravas, Chandraketu, Jayatsena, and other cloud-swift chariot-heroes It was getting to be evening, and because Abhimanyu showed no sign of retreating the battle flared up fiercely Such carnage was never witnessed in the last twelve days Six maha-chariot-heroes—Drona, Kripa, Kritavarman, Ashvatthaman, Brihadbala and Karna—launched a concerted attack on Abhimanyu, isolated in the centre of the Chakravyuha Yes, Karna was among them His lifelong resentment could take him to any lengths But Abhimanyu refused to surrender At the end there was a terrible mace duel between Duryodhana's son Lakshmana and Abhimanyu, so fierce that both were knocked senseless as they hit each other simultaneously Lakshmana recovered first, without a second thought he smashed his mace on the head of unconscious Abhimanyu The blood-red, lotus-like face of Abhimanyu became a pulpy mass Before dying, he uttered plaintively, "Uncle Bhi-ma! Uncle Bhi-ma!" Hearing him, even the hardest-hearted soldier melted Only Jayadratha, however, haughtily stepped forward and, to see if the inert Abhimanyu, who lay face down on the ground, was really dead, kicked at the corpse The mutilated face was embedded in the ground by the force of Lakshmana's blow, only the trunk of the corpse turned over Abhimanyu, valiant son of Arjuna, not wanting any Kaurava soldier to see his radiant lotus visage, hid his face in the supremely hospitable earth His corpse sprawled askew in the dead centre of the Chakravyuha

As soon as Arjuna heard of Jayadratha's savage deed, he rolled his large eyes and, lifting his Gandiva-bow, vowed, "Before sunset tomorrow I will despatch to the realm of Yama the man who dared to kick the body of my loved son, if I fail to do this, I will enter fire and reach heaven where I will offer my son paternal affection"

The thirteenth sunset arrived with Arjuna weeping as he did *pradakshina* around the corpse of Abhimanyu Thirteen areas of

Kurukshetra had become horrendous battling grounds in those thirteen days. The field was a veritable charnel-house.

That night I saw to it that no one entered my tent; instead, I summoned an astrologer. He wrote out figures on birch-bark, and started calculating on his fingers. It was midnight when he raised his head. Adjusting his head-gear, he said, "Tomorrow is the total solar eclipse of the dark fortnight. Yes, Raja of the Yadavas! In the afternoon." I removed my pearl necklace and, throwing it to him, asked him to return to Hastinapura. He vanished in the thick darkness outside.

The fourteenth day of the war dawned. Till the afternoon I kept manoeuvring Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot amongst the Kaurava columns, but failed to find Jayadratha. The Kauravas had not let him even set foot in Kurukshetra. Guarded by thousands of crack soldiers, he was hiding, cooped up inside a tent. Unable to lay hands on Jayadratha, Arjuna flew into a terrible rage and, toppling Niyatayu, Mitradeva, Dandadhara and others, wiping out one contingent of soldiers after another, shouting "Where is Jayadratha? Where is Jayadratha?" he shot across the field like a bolt of lightning. The battle-engrossed soldiers were so bewildered they could not even make out why the sky had become dark in the afternoon.

In no time at all there was total eclipse of the Sun. An all-encompassing darkness. Screeching flocks of birds began speeding back to their nests. Crickets shrilled "krr-krr". Hundreds of torches flared up in the precincts of Kurukshetra. It seemed to all that day had ended, and the sun had set.

Arjuna had failed to keep his vow. A funeral pyre was readied for him, in a central elevated spot, in full view of the Kauravas and Pandavas. Confused and ashamed, Arjuna tearfully paid his last respects to me, Yudhishthira, Bhima, and his aged mother. And feeling that along with him the Gandiva-bow also had been found wanting, he ascended the grand eight-cubit pyre holding his bow and quiver, his head bowed ignominiously. Joining his palms, he closed his eyes; slowly chanting the Gayatri mantra, "Om! *Bhurbhuvah*! *Svaha*! *Tat Savitur*... Om!" he prepared to die. An attendant touched a torch to the pyre with trembling hands. I strained my eyes to spot Jayadratha. He was hiding behind Duryodhana, with the end of his shawl wrapped around his face as women do. He had come to feast his cruel eyes on the fire-immolation of Arjuna.

Then, suddenly, the eclipse cleared Rays flashed from the fiery orb, like streams of water gushing from a smashed clay pot Mocking the torches, the Sun-God stood at his height on the western horizon Screeching flocks of birds left their nests The shrilling of the crickets ceased

"Arjuna, there, see, the sun—and there, see, Jayadratha!" I pointed first to the sun and then to Jayadratha, where he had concealed himself Expert in the art of shooting at a person on the slightest sound made by him, Arjuna in a flash strung a snake-shaft to his Gandiva Speeding harmlessly through the others, it whizzed towards Jayadratha, biting his neck What happened—and how—even Arjuna was at a loss to know

And so the fourteenth day ended, the day of the trick of the eclipse, with Jayadratha lying on the magnificent funeral pyre intended for Arjuna There was no knowing now what turn the war would take

Losing no time, infuriated Duryodhana summoned a meeting of the four-fold chiefs in his tent They had all become disheartened by the heart-stirring, dramatic change of events This was the first time such depression, despair and delusion had struck the Kaurava camp So far as the Pandavas were concerned, everything was happening exactly as I wanted it to happen

To console Duryodhana, drowning in lamenting the killing by Arjuna of his sister's husband, Karna said, "The victory that Kartikeya obtained for Indra, I will obtain for you I'll fire the deadly Vaijayanti-missile granted to me by Indra, and uproot Arjuna and the Pandavas once and for all "

Acharya Kripa thought this hope of Karna ridiculous Instantly springing to his feet, he declared, "Charioteer's son, your entire life has been spent in making sky-high promises Have you fulfilled even one vow of yours? You have always fled from the battle-field—remember the skirmish with the Gandharva Chitrasena, the cattle-lifting in the city of Virata, the chariot duel with Bhima? Your dharma is the art of running away No one has the power to vanquish Arjuna who humbled even Shiva dressed as a Kirata tribal, and who has Sri Krishna always at his side "

Hardly had Acharya Kripa spoken than Karna unsheathed his sword and rushed at him "Brahmin who hurls endless insults at me, today I will cut off your foul tongue!" He placed the blade of his sword on Kripa's neck Duryodhana stepped in between and

pacified Karna But this incident highlighted one bitter truth—how was it possible for Ashvatthaman to tolerate this gross insult to his maternal uncle, Acharya Kripa? He pulled out his sword against Karna—against his life-precious friend Karna "Bragging insulter of my uncle, Karna, your throat should be cut long before Arjuna's!" Saying this, he leapt at Karna No one in the assembly could believe that these two were life-precious friends who had spent their lives discussing the virtues of mind and heart and soul It could not be true No wonder truth is sometimes more incredible than imagination But Duryodhana skilfully pacified Ashvatthaman However, a gentle person, once roused, is beyond control—his wrath goes haywire

"I vow I will never again set eyes on this son of a charioteer!" Declaring this in a determined voice, Guru Drona's son Ashvatthaman stalked out of the tent A veritable temple tottered and collapsed The fact that Ashvatthaman, who loved him more than life itself, had addressed him, even unknowingly, as "Son of a charioteer" made Karna lower his neck in unbearable pain

Drona, Kripa, Karna and Ashvatthaman were infuriated by Jayadratha's death An unprecedented night-battle commenced Guided by the lights of hundreds of flaming torches, Guru Drona launched an offensive against Raja Shibi Somadatta pounced on Satyaki A gory clash ensued Like bamboo clumps exploding in a forest fire at night on a hill slope, the din of clashing weapons created a terrifying cacophony near the waters of the Drishadvati Wiping out Shibi and Bahlika, Guru Drona concentrated his energies on decimating the other Pandava ranks Surrounded by all the five Pandavas, Karna was able nonetheless to becloud them with showers of arrows He routed Yudhishthira, Yudhishthira, harassed, retreated to face Drona Nakula faced Shakuni This led to the first ever clash between Karna and Arjuna But Karna, experienced in nocturnal combat, excelled Arjuna again and again Karna sliced through the ranks of Pandava soldiers at will, like a river of red-hot molten steel There was no emotional tie holding him back now He wrought havoc among the Kekayas, Panchalas and other maha-chariot-heroes With his steed Vayujit, the Wind-Swift One, living up to his name and freely roaming over the battlefield, like an incensed lion ravaging herds of deer incredibly powerful Karna pursued hordes of Pandava warriors fleeing in fear Like a fierce storm ruinously churning the ocean

waves, he whirled through the enemy ranks He knew his father the Sun was no more visible in the sky, but the task of scorching the field of Kurukshetra was now the responsibility of the son Not one—Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Yuyudhana, Bhima, Yudhishthira, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna—could withstand the tremendous onslaught of this mightily rolling river in spate Yudhishthira, terrified, stopped every valiant soldier, asking, "Will Radha's son leave some soldiers alive, or will he turn them all into a single silent flow of blood like the Drishadvati river?" If Karna was not checked, tomorrow would never dawn for the Pandava army The situation was critical Something *had* to be done It was a question of life or death for the Pandavas

Only one warrior was capable of saving them The wonder-weaving war-magician Ghatotkacha! The son of Bhima and Hidimba! I summoned him through Bhima Ghatotkacha had no occasion so far to show his mettle With the blessings of all the Pandavas, the huge-bodied son of Bhima, whistling shrilly, tore down on the Kaurava ranks like a wild forest wind with his host of Rakshasa warriors Screaming, he hurled massive boulders, huge tree trunks, wheels, and spear-like weapons on the Kulindas, Saindhavas, Gandharas, Madras, Avantis and other Kaurava ranks He engaged in a savage, demonic, hour-long duel with Alayudha, the brother of Bakasura In the process, time and again he inadvertently slaughtered many of his own soldiers Finally, at midnight Ghatotkacha butchered Alayudha in a mind-shattering, bloody fashion Terror-stricken, the Kaurava forces scattered helter-skelter, screaming, "Karna, help! Help, Karna!" With the intention of blocking Ghatotkacha, Karna manoeuvred himself in front They dashed against each other like two oceans at high tide Forgetting their individual duels, all the soldiers on the field stood gaping spectators of the death-shattering collision between the son of the Sun-God and the son of Bhima One moment in the sky, the next moment on earth—deceiving Karna with his wonder-weaving war-maya, Ghatotkacha for over two hours roared like a storm-cloud and rained massive chariot-wheels, corpses of elephants, huge boulders and heavy maces on his enemy But, like a steep-sloping golden mountain down which mineral streams flow, Karna stood firm in spite of the wounds all over his body, smilingly enduring the hail of missiles, straight as a *palasha*-tree, not betraying the least sign of unease, and counter-attacked with a swarm of

divine weapons Chanting verses continually in praise of the Sun-God, he circled the field and showered a veritable cataract of arrows on Ghatotkacha Thousands of Kaurava warriors fell screaming victims to the stupor-creating magic war-skills of Ghatotkacha Furious Karna felled Ghatotkacha's charioteer Virupaksha with a single marrow-piercing shaft Worried Duryodhana approached Karna's chariot and, raising his hands, said, "Karna, shoot the Indra-gifted Vaijayanti-missile at the rakshasa Ghatotkacha If you don't, none of the Kaurava soldiers will survive to see tomorrow Raja of Anga, fire the Vaijayanti!"

"No, Duryodhana, the Vaijayanti is reserved for Arjuna It is the only weapon left to redeem the shame I have endured all my life " Karna shouted his refusal so loud that Duryodhana's ear-drums seemed to burst

Hounded by Ghatotkacha, hundreds of thousands of terrified Kaurava soldiers knelt before Karna, supplicating, "Gift-granting Karna, release the Vaijayanti! Save our lives! Kill Ghatotkacha and save us!"

Gift-granter! Two words that had charmed Karna all his life His noble soul melted at the sound of those two words which were, as it were, welded to his life Closing his eyes briefly, he meditated, then, selecting the Indra-gifted Vaijayanti-missile from his quiver, he fitted it to his bow and shot it straight at Ghatotkacha Now his life had become literally an empty quiver

Wonder-weaving Ghatotkacha's massive frame fell on the ground as he screamed his death-yell, it seemed as if the entire firmament had collapsed on the earth When an *ashoka*-tree topples, countless insects and ants are crushed under it, so his huge thudding body pulped many Kaurava soldiers

The nocturnal battle was over

Over also Ghatotkacha's life, which was intended to make Karna helpless Somewhere far away, a wild rooster crowed the birth of dawn The fifteenth extraordinary day had come The memorable first day of the bright fortnight

4

Adopting the Lotus-Formation, Guru Drona stationed himself at the head Despite the continuous battle at night, despite their total lack of rest, the weary warriors of both camps positioned

themselves face to face Here and there were *ingudi* stone-lamps with depleted oil, spluttering out thin wisps of smoke The Pandavas led by Arjuna clashed with the Kauravas As the armies on Kurukshetra dwindled, the waters of the Sarasvati and Drishadvati swelled with the inflow of blood A huge coagulated mass of blood, flesh and mud slid slowly every day along the sloping south of the field The reflections of funeral pyres flickering in the Drishadvati's blood-filled waters were gruesome omens Neither the Pandavas nor the Kauravas had any control on the battlefield Horrible, merciless Death was its uncrowned monarch, choosing whoever he wished to embrace as he whipped the horse of his world-conquering chariot over the field

Guru Drona fought with full strength till mid-day Then, suddenly, someone shouted, "Ashvatthaman is slain! Ashvatthaman is slain!" What happened was that an elephant called Ashvatthaman of Raja Indravarman of the Malavas had been killed

To find out the truth, Drona sped his chariot across the field until he came near the chariot of truth-loving Yudhishthira "Prince Yudhishthira, everyone is shouting, 'Ashvatthaman is slain!' Is it true my beloved Ashu is dead? Tell me, is it true? Let your word be your guru-*dakshina* I have full faith in your word "

"Guru deva, it is true Ashvatthaman is dead But I do not know if it is Ashvatthaman the elephant or Ashvatthaman the hero " Yudhishthira spoke an untruth for the first time in his life The second sentence was spoken indistinctly, mumbling to himself

Throwing away his bow, Drona grieving the loss of his son, adopted, in the chariot itself, the lotus-posture and plunged into deep meditation Faith failed the firm mind of the ninety-year old patriarch Closing his eyes and entering the dark cave of his body, he opened his mind's eye to search for soul's light that radiates within In the meantime, bloodshot-eyed Dhrishtadyumna leapt from his chariot like a bolt of lightning on a tree, and sprinted towards Drona with drawn sword Behind him were the Pandavas, running, shouting "Stop! Stop!" In one bound he jumped inside Drona's chariot and, before anyone could guess what was happening, he had clutched Drona's white horse-tail-thick shining head of hair and, with one swift stroke, decapitated him He flung the head on the ground between the two opposing armies All present closed their eyes on the grisly scene. The white-haired, lotus-faced radiant head that for sixty years had expounded the divine

message of the Isha Upanishad to hundreds of students—"The world is swaddled with the glory of God"—now lay clumsily on the ground, besmeared with mud The greatest of gurus, who had ruled the minds of all with love, rolled in the dust The day had come for Drona, who at every step mocked Karna, to be mocked now by pitiless Death

Shouts of "Drona is dead!" reverberated through the distant ranks, and the fighting stopped spontaneously Warriors from both camps gathered round the chariot to mourn Drona Weeping copiously, Ashvatthaman joined the severed head to his father's trunk The personification of the art and science of archery had found his final peace

Even Karna, humiliated all his life by Drona, wept As he bent to touch the lifeless feet in a last farewell, his streaming tears seemed to be saying to the departed soul, "Guru-deva, all my life you never really understood me "

Without saying anything, he placed his hand with deep affection on Ashvatthaman's shoulder Forgetting everything From the depth of the love in his heart

Maddened by the gory end of his father, Ashvatthaman fired the Narayana-missile, which massacred thousands of Pandava soldiers Eventually I had to step in to neutralise it

The dark shades of evening were beginning to shroud every tent on Kurukshetra Seeing the flaming pyre of Guru Drona made Duryodhana burn with anger, so much so that he even forgot to assess how profound must Ashvatthaman's anguish be and how necessary it was to restrain Guru Drona's son at this juncture He strode forward and, tugging frequently at his slipping shawl, he kicked open the netted screen of his tent-entrance and, like a wounded elephant sliding inside a river, he slipped inside Ashvatthaman's tent He had no idea what he should say, and how he should say it He was like a man who lights a forest fire and is himself consumed in it Seeing him silent, Ashvatthaman, whose face was covered in the white shawl of his father, said excitedly, without lifting his head, "Raja I will take a savage revenge for the savage murder of my father For tomorrow's battle for tomorrow's battle install fierce, heroic, world-conquering, sun worshipping Karna as Commander-in-Chief '

How could the fountain of his love as Karna's friend ever dry up?

Duryodhana emerged from his tent and marched straight to Karna's He stayed there till midnight Striding up and down like a clawless lion, he kept repeating, "Raja of Anga, it was truly never my desire to have Grandsire Bhishma and Guru Drona installed as Commanders-in-Chief of our limitless army I am convinced that the Kaurava army which once, under your leadership, succeeded on a world-conquering mission will tomorrow also succeed in winning the battle of Kurukshetra Karna, hundreds of thousands of drops of holy water from the Ganga which you have offered with such dedication to the Sun-God as *arghya* must be gleaming in the rays of the Sun, tomorrow hundreds of thousands of Pandava soldiers will find heaven by dropping dead at your feet Arjuna's blue skin will turn black when he faces your Jaitra chariot And Bhima—mention of whose name curdles my blood, who mercilessly murdered my brothers—the body of that cruel Bhima, pierced by your deadly arrows, will become as blood-red as his blood-red eyes As for Yudhishthira, who is constantly stooping to look at your narrow feet—well, when he sees your feats as Commander-in Chief tomorrow, he will stoop before you for ever And when the twins Nakula and Sahadeva see the cocked ears of your steed Vayujit, they will realise they are facing their final doom and that trickster from Mathura who stands in a corner and solves others' quarrels, that black milkman will forsake Arjuna's chariot and run to you, begging you to spare his life, like a mean, supplicating mendicant! Karna, you will lead our army tomorrow You will, my friend " He kept repeating this, like a chariot wheel slipped from its axle wobbling along in circles

But Karna kept silent, staring out of the window of his tent, from where he could see the flames of Guru Drona's pyre leaping up on the bank of the Drishadvati Not a single word of Duryodhana penetrated his ear Or if it penetrated, it lingered there, no more than for a second Finally he said this much "Raja, I will lay down my life to secure victory for you Friend who elevated me from charioteer to king! This body of mine which has received so much affection from you will continue to be of total service to you on the battlefield Go, sleep Neither one's sleep nor one's word should ever be left incomplete " Wrapped in the cloak of sleep, night slipped away The torches seemed to flame bright with bitterness

5

The sixteenth dawn arrived, sprinkling Kurukshetra with the fragrance of *parijata*-flowers as golden as the rays of the sun. The second day of the bright fortnight.

Just as the gallery of gods had installed Skanda their leader in their war against the anti-gods, Duryodhana installed Karna Commander-in-Chief in front of the entire army of the Kauravas. The site of the original first-day battle lay six miles to the north. The battle locations changed daily, shifting further and further south.

Karna sat on an *audumbara*-wood seat covered with linen; Duryodhana had tied tightly a bracelet of white odoriferous tube-roses on Karna's right wrist; drawing his sharp sword and waving it skyward he announced, "The Commander-in-Chief of the Kauravas—World-Conquering Raja of Anga, Karna!"

"Victory! Victory! Victory!" Raining multi-hued fragrant flowers on their new Commander-in-Chief, the Kauravas completely forgot for the moment Bhishma and Drona. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras thronged to catch a glimpse of the glowing face of their leader. The *purohitas* and palace bards poured scented oil on his golden curly hair. The instant the perforated pot meant to announce the auspicious hour was dropped gurgling into the bowl of water, Duryodhana, in order to crown Karna, lifted from the golden plate the splendid diadem reserved for the Commander-in-Chief. Gesturing with his hand his refusal, the maha-chariot-hero Karna, born son of Kunti and reared son of Radha, was nonetheless pleased with the honour, and glanced affectionately at his son Vrishasena who was standing beside him. Immediately, Vrishasena placed a golden plate in front of his father. Karna removed the silk cloth covering the plate and, before Duryodhana could stop him, lifted the golden diadem lying on the plate and placed it on his own head.

That diadem was an exact duplicate of mine.

The Emperor of the Firmament, Surya the Sun-God, driving his thousand-rayed chariot on the eastern horizon, paused momentarily. Partridges, *chakravakas*, cranes, wild parrots, red-legged *chakoras* rose from their nests and circled the air in welcome. Pearly dewdrops gleamed on grassblade tips. The breeze made the dewdrops trickle and merge with the vast throbbing heart of

Kurukshetra The universe of moving and unmoving life seemed to dance in a joyous new consciousness

Commander-in-Chief Karna climbed a high mound to select a favourable spot for his army-formation The Kaurava forces deployed themselves in the formidable Crocodile Array

The eyes of the Crocodile were Shakuni and Uluka The head was furious Ashvatthaman The front left foot was Kritavarman, the front right Gautama The hind feet were protected by Raja Shalya of Madra, and the stomach of the Crocodile was Duryodhana surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Kaurava soldiers, with Karna as the mouth protecting him Karna's golden Vijaya-bow, dazzling in the sunlight, seemed to be saying to the Pandava hosts "I will not shoot only arrows today—I will shoot fiery bolts of sunlight " The white horses yoked to his chariot stood still, ears cocked, jaws taut, waiting for the reins to be flicked, and scratching impatiently at the Kurukshetra turf The white pennants, blazing like comets, on his Jaitra chariot, which towered above all, fluttered with the wind, all around his majestic sceptre-symbolled ochre war-flag Tiny golden bells on the flag-pole tinkled sweetly The rear of the chariot was loaded with rods, spears, javelins, discuses, *varuthas*, maces, pipe-guns, swords, tridents, and axes So vast was the number of arrows of all kinds that even a hundred quivers were insufficient to contain them The entire chariot was covered with tiger-skin

Karna lifted and waved his gloriously-garlanded Vijaya-bow when Duryodhana, from the centre of the Crocodile Formation, blew on a special conch to signal the commencement of the offensive His red veins swelling as thick as horses' reins, Karna blew into his Hiranyagarbha conch with such force that all the ravenous hawks and vultures that had congregated in and around the battlefield shot up into the sky, screeching in fright That noise was no conchshell peal—it seemed as if the first-born son of Kunti was hurling the snake-wrath of a wounded pride that had accumulated over a succession of yugas

"Ad-vance!" He lifted high his powerful mailed arm, and shouted his sky-piercing command The Crocodile Formation of the Kauravas opened wide its Karna-jaws and marched inexorably, eager to swallow the Pandavas in its path A growling, voracious, incensed reptile

The Pandava army marched under Arjuna's Command in the

Half-Moon Formation I held the reins of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot; guarding his right flank was Dhrishtadyumna, on his left, mounted on an elephant, marched red-eyed Bhima leading the elephant column, at the back was Yudhishthira Seeing Karna facing him, Yudhishthira trembled in fear Raising his hand, Arjuna ordered the horn-tips of the moon to push back a little, immediately, blowing on his Devadatta conch, he advanced swiftly As I whipped the horses ahead, it occurred to me that Arjuna had no idea of his relationship with the person he was fighting against, while Karna did That was why the battle had become such a weird travesty

Seeing the white-horsed, lion-roaring Karna charging upon them in his chariot, the Pandava warriors were dumbfounded—was it the scorching sun radiating from a mountain peak, or was it the sun flashing its rays from a dazzling, gold plated chariot? Karna's face glowed like a golden jar bathed in light Never before had it shone so brilliantly A jolt of the chariot made his thick curly hair hanging down on his broad shoulders flick sideways, then it moved back to normal He had the shoulders of a bull, he charged with the energy of a forest storm He was an agitated ocean, spilling over at high tide He was an erupting volcano, reducing all to ashes in its path His blue eyes scoured the field for the ape-banner But I had been very clever today I had so reversed the ape-banner on the pole that the ape symbol flapped only on one side—the side facing the Pandavas The two armies collided like roaring giants

Unable to spot the ape-banner, bewildered Karna swung his chariot to face our elephant ranks Shooting endless streams of poisoned arrows like torrential rains at the time of the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation, he succeeded in piercing the feet of our elephants in his very first assault Maddened by the poison circulating in their blood, the elephants broke ranks and fled helter-skelter, trampling thousands of Pandava soldiers in panic The desperately surviving warriors, thrashing in agony as they fell down wounded, were reduced to bleeding pulp

Incensed Bhima ran to stop the carnage of our elephants by Karna, he was obstructed by Ashvatthaman They fought like two fierce clawing tigers Satyaki clashed with Vinda and Anuvinda Dhrishtadyumna trapped Acharya Kripa in a pincer movement Shrutikirti attacked Shalya, Raja of Madra Sahadeva and

Duhshasana showered arrows at each other Duryodhana abandoned his position in the centre of the formation and manoeuvred his chariot to confront Yudhishthira, immediately I blocked his path, with Arjuna ready to protect Yudhishthira As the sun rose high, so did the clouds of dust, obscuring the sky The trumpeting of elephants drowned the din of weapon clashing against weapon Unable to spot Arjuna anywhere, Karna angrily decimated the ranks of Panchala and Matsya under his chariot The higher the sun rose, the greater became his chariot's velocity Sometimes spear, sometimes lance, sometimes mace—he hurled one weapon after another, pausing only to wipe the drops of perspiration under his ears

High noon Bhima toppled the skilled warrior Kshemadhurti off his chariot Though pursued by crack Samshaptàka troops, Arjuna slew Raja Danda and Dandadhara, which so infuriated Ashvatthaman that he charged blindly at Arjuna A confused clash occurred where Karna had penetrated the Panchala ranks So much so that each warrior first asked which camp his adversary belonged to, they fought bewildered, like drunks

I saw the Panchalas and Matsyas systematically being annihilated by heroic Karna, and to stop the massacre I repeatedly warned Nakula by blowing deep into my Panchajanya conch "Nakula! Nakula! Turn your chariot towards Karna!" In the clamour of battle it took more than half an hour for my message to reach Nakula It was six hours later that he arrived with his army to reinforce the Matsyas, without any further delay he charged at Karna

But the army leader he chose to attack was no gentle waterfall, he was a resistless bolt of lightning He repulsed all Nakula's arrows, he repeatedly unchārioted Nakula, he laughed at Nakula's ineptitude In the end, he locked his towering chariot with defenceless Nakula's and said, "Go, send your elder brother Arjuna to fight me I'm letting you off, be my messenger "

Nakula went back humiliated, his head hanging down But he was unaware of the fact that Karna, the first-born son of Kunti, the eldest of the Pandavas, was doing what he did because Nakula's mother Madri, at the time of her sati, had placed Nakula's welfare in Kunti Devi's hands, and Karna was seeing to it that the promise given by his mother to Madri was honoured Though the time had come for the cosmic fire to engulf and consume all, Karna would

act so that the promise to the Queen Mother Kunti Devi was scrupulously kept That evening Yudhishthira's son Prativindhya cut off Chitraraja's head

The sunrays of evening were casting long tree shadows on Kurukshetra when I drove Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot for the first time to face Karna's Jaitra chariot They flared up, and their faces glowed like fires fanned by the wind They screamed at each other so shrilly that even the nearby elephants took fright and fled Aiming at each other, they fired an endless stream of heavy arrows that shrouded the sky in an instant, like clouds overcasting the sky at the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation For an hour they rained lethal, swift, noisy arrows on each other Sparks flashed from their coats of mail Even before night fell, those sparks lit up the sky like so many stars Scorched by those sparks, Karna's charioteer Satyasena fell down dead, pierced by Arjuna's arrows The sky which that day was blanketed by Arjuna's and Karna's arrow-swarms, the sky that canopied Kurukshetra like a gigantic umbrella of wild goat's hair, never became cloudless after that encounter, because the night-resembling magic-creating warrior Mayavi, son of Maya, shot rays of pitch nocturnal blackness that darkened even the arrows of the two adversaries The hideous sixteenth day of the bright fortnight passed in this manner

6

Night wrapped Kurukshetra in dense darkness An inky blackness shrouded the horizon With one exception—the flickering flames of Satyasena's pyre on the bank of the Drishadvati relieved a little the ubiquitous gloom

Satyasena was not only the man who held the reins of Karna's chariot, he was not only his wife's brother, not just a man dedicated totally to Kaurava welfare, he was a drum that sounded warning when confusing conflicts inevitably rose from the circumstances connected with Karna's life as a king He was a genuine well wisher So Karna sat and brooded on the bank of the Drishad vati, staring fixedly at Satyasena's pyre

He saw Satyasena in each yellow tongue of flame that leapt from the pyre to lick the pitch black hide of the night elephant, the same Satyasena who used to meet him at an odd hour of night, carrying a pot on his shoulder, on the bank of the Ganga

He had gifted away his flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, he was loaded with death-like curses on his head, he was a treasure-house of refulgence but, living a life of the utmost simplicity, he had arrived at last at this spot He had let loose Vaijayanti, the last miracle-missile he had, on Ghatotkacha, and he was now reduced to nothing He was alone, absolutely so

But even in this utter aloneness, there was in him an invincible soul-radiance born of the fervour of his noble blood, his totality of dedication, and his worship of the Sun-God—and this is what sustained him through crises That soul-radiance determined his real life That soul-radiance made him slice forward through life like an arrow shot from a bow I am part of a larger radiance, I am inspired secretly by something divine in me—this was the one throbbing refrain of his life's song This confidence was not given to anyone else It was very difficult to understand the nature of this radiance His life had two clear aspects His noble soul deriving strength from his subtle, inexplicable faith in the Sun-God connection, and his mind and body tied to the daily domestic duties of social life Sometimes the two merged in an undeniable and unimaginable union—and that paradox made his life so full of confusion and conflict, so puzzling and mysterious

And now his charioteer Satyasena had left him and gone on a never-ending journey He knew all too well that more than half of a maha chariot-hero's excellence depended on the skill of his charioteer His direction, his speed was where his charioteer drove him With Satyasena gone for ever, it was now perfectly possible for the once freely-roaming tiger-skin-covered Jaitra chariot, careening through the four-fold ranks of the Pandava army, to get bogged down in the blood-and-slime swamp of Kurukshetra

His mind a void, his eyes unblinking, fixedly staring at Satyasena's pyre, he stood all alone on the bank of the Drishadvati Had despair overpowered him? Numbness? Absentmindedness? Or had he transcended his senses, gone beyond all the dusty limitations of the world's horizon?

I was sure, completely sure that his heroism was great, as was his spirit of renunciation, his love for his subjects was extraordinary, but the most extraordinary quality in him was his devotion to the Sun-God, and truly extraordinary was the purity he had gained by the strength of his *tapasya* But but the way he had slandered Draupadi and stained her spotless virtue in the packed assembly

had irretrievably tarnished his excellence They all said that it was Duryodhana who had made Karna into a pitiable figure, but no one knew that it was Draupadi who had made him deserving of pity An insult to humanity is pardonable once, but a slur on woman—from whose womb humanity takes birth—is so obnoxious as to be never forgivable The society, the country where woman is violated and shamed, is the society and country that digs its own ditch of doom, and dies in it

But I also knew that the Pandava army was afraid of his valour He had to an extent redeemed himself of the insult to Draupadi by honouring the Queen Mother Kunti Devi Had he revealed the truth of his relationship with Kunti Devi, the Pandavas would not have fought the Kauravas They would not have fought the Kauravas even to revenge the slur on Draupadi

If anyone had protected the virtuous name of a mother who floated away her new-born son on the Ashva's waters, it was Karna

The fact that he was responsible for the unforgivable sullying of the name of the virtuous wife Draupadi pricked Karna's conscience all his life He had wanted me to convey a humble message to her "If at all it is possible for her, ask her to forgive me "

Was it possible that he hadn't heard from Hiranyamayi how strong was Draupadi's attraction for him nor the suggestion that Draupadi spend two months each with all the six brothers? In spite of that, he had thought it out and decided to fight on the side of the Kauravas, and wasn't his decision of paying the price for not killing the Pandavas an indirect way of showing his deep respect for Draupadi?

That is why, taking everything into account, I knew that Karna's valour was a source of fearful danger for the Pandavas

Making up his mind, Karna rose from the stone seat Briefly, he stared in the direction of the darkness enveloped eastern skyline Sighing deeply, he walked towards his tent for a good night's sleep Suddenly a heart-piercing wail rent the thick darkness on the Drishadvati river "Bhai-ya-ya?" Hearing that scream, even the flames on Satyasena's pyre trembled It was Vrishali Satyasena's sister Karna's wife

Ashvatthaman had despatched a horse-rider to Hastinapura with news of Satyasena's death As soon as she heard the news, Vrishali, lady of a charioteer family, without informing anyone,

left her chores and, driving a chariot by herself, sped like the wind, like a river overflowing its banks, for the last darshan of her brother

She ran towards the pyre as if her dress was on fire Karna did not see her, he recognised her by her scream, and instantly the calm of the pool of his memories was disturbed A single eddy whirled again and again "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!"

Seeing Vrishali, his stillness, his composure, his silence vanished instantly

He seized his incoherent, blindly running wife in his strong embrace Who knows what emotions were contained in that togetherness?

"Maharaja! Maharaja!" She beat her face, round as a pot, on his massive chest For she was after all Karna's wife, a lady full of tender familial feelings, who sacrificed for and sympathised with others

She laid her troubled head on Karna's broad chest

It seemed that the ink-black darkness opened its eyes to witness their close, poignant embrace The still waters of the Drishadvati river re-rippled The battleground of Kurukshetra was witness

But he did not say even one word The freely flowing tears from Vrishali's large eyes tried again and again to resurrect a fresh fire in his peaceful, calm, lost in-a distant-horizon mind

Gleaming fitfully in the light of the pyre, their bodies united They were locked in each other, lost in each other They were one being, as it were

The rhythm of the blood coursing through Karna's veins gave Vrishali some consolation "Tomorrow either Arjuna embraces the all accepting earth of Kurukshetra, or or your husband travels the noble path to the golden orb of the Sun "

He helped his life-long, uncomplaining, beloved wife into the Jaitra chariot, and personally escorted her to the palace of the Kauravas in Hastinapura

7

Returning from the palace, he did not fail to notice the swans slumbering in the courtyard A desire rose in him to stir and disperse the reflections these proud birds cast in the palace pool,

glimmering in the soft light of the torches Quickly he removed the large yellow sapphire ring from his finger and flung it in the pool The reflections shivered The images shook The sleeping swans flapped awake, and thumped their webbed feet Ripples formed in the pool Seeing them expand in ever-widening circles, he laughed to himself

He strode swiftly towards the ancient gate of the palace's main wall in order to return to his tent Pausing for a moment near the main gate, he looked up at Vrishali's palace She was standing beside a window with his youngest son Vrishaketu He was the only son of Karna, safe in Hastinapura, removed from the cosmic-fire of the Kurukshetra carnage He made an effort to raise his hand, he let his eyes linger once on the endless flight of stairs, then, deciding not to lift his hand, he stepped outside the gate As if with dogged determination He stepped out of the palace like an elephant emerging from a lake As if shutting off his mind, forsaking all family ties

It was past midnight when he reached his tent in Kurukshetra Outside, near the door, stood Duryodhana, anxiously waiting for him

Duryodhana was upset, wondering if his would be Commander-in Chief of tomorrow had deserted and returned to Champa-nagari Seeing Karna, his face lit up Swift as an arrow, he rushed forward and stopped the chariot by firmly gripping Vayujit's saddle The horse snorted heavily, foaming at the mouth

Without giving Karna time even to dismount, Duryodhana stepped up to him and said, "Raja of Anga, your Satyasena is no more with us Who will drive your chariot tomorrow?" Even in the dim light of the torch one could see Duryodhana's pointed nostrils flaring

"Raja, give me a skilled, reliable charioteer You will see then how my chariot races through the field like a resistless wind '

"Skilled reliable charioteer?" Creasing his forehead, and striking his right fist twice in the cupped palm of his left hand, Duryodhana thought hard A faint sweat was discernible on his brow His thick curved eyebrows became more curved In the yellowish reddish light of the torch his red face glowed even more fierce, looking almost sinister, as his large pink eyes darted into the inner corners of his mind, as if peering into the future Any sharp observer could guess from the harsh look on his countenance that he was in great anxiety

The major dilemma of who was competent to be Karna's charioteer made Duryodhana forget even the tortuous route his life had taken before arriving at such a crisis His finely woven, expensive shawl of Kaurava royalty, which was always slipping from his shoulders, had fallen on the ground without his being aware of it It had escaped his mind to adjust it back to position with a swift gesture, as was his habit

Both were silent for some time Like two stone statues in the Kaurava palace

"Raja of Anga, if you don't mind, there is only one warrior whom I can recommend Only he is fit to hold the reins of your chariot " The Duryodhana stone-statue broke the silence

"Who?" Karna removed his diadem and heavy coat of mail, placing them in a large tray His thick curly locks flowed out like free-flying autumn birds The crease mark left by his coat-of-mail was discernible on his handsome neck

"Raja Shalya of the Madras " Duryodhana placed his brawny right hand on Karna's shoulder

"Shalya? Raja, you forget Shalya is related to the Pandavas—he is their maternal uncle, the Queen Mother Madri Devi's own brother This war began indeed with a throw of dice, but please don't gamble now in our hour of crisis " He squinted his blue, long eyes A wreath of wrinkles appeared on his golden forehead

"Karna, even before the war started the respect I showed to Shalya was different from the respect I gave to other rajas It is true that he left the kingdom of Madra with the intention of joining the Pandavas But I intercepted him, and by ordering, at every stage of his journey, the erection of welcome arches in his honour, and by despatching royal messengers to felicitate him with expensive gifts, I succeeded in winning him over to our side He has taken a solemn vow to help the Kauravas in this war During the last sixteen days, he has fought for us with determination and dedication Repeatedly he has reinforced our warriors when they were harassed by Bhima Take my word for it, Shalya is not one who will now go back on his word Kshatriyas do not repent, Kshatriyas do not retreat—when the time comes they readily embrace even death to achieve heaven You know this very well Family links are for ordinary mortals, rajas have different ties Their links are Word given, total dedication, performance on the field of battle " Without waiting for Karna's reply, he clapped his hands Prabhanjana entered

"Prabhanjana, go, respectfully request Maharaja Shalya of the Madras to come here " He pointed in the direction of Shalya's tent

Shalya appeared in no time and stood before them He was expecting only Duryodhana to be present—at most, Ashvatthaman, and Shakuni The instant he saw Karna, his forehead furrowed He had no knowledge of how Karna was related to him That apart, he had not forgotten the bitter humiliation he had suffered at the hands of Karna during the world conquest mission Glancing wryly at Karna, Shalya jerked his shawl tight But Karna, son of Surya, was not angered by Shalya's Kshatriyan pride, he did not despise Shalya, he was not disheartened He remained silent, unmoving

"Maharaja, I have inconvenienced you at a very odd hour, but it concerns a matter of the utmost urgency and importance " Duryodhana broke the heavy silence

"What matter, Maharaja?" Shalya turned his back on Karna and looked straight at Duryodhana

"Our tomorrow is in your hands " Duryodhana fixed his pink eyes on Shalya

"My hands? How?" Unable to surmise what Duryodhana meant, Shalya creased his forehead

"Maharaja, tomorrow tomorrow only you must be the charioteer of the Kaurava Commander-in Chief " Duryodhana placed his muscular hand on Shalya's shoulder and looked into Shalya's eyes for an answer

"Raja!" Shalya uttered the word at a high pitch, and lapsed into silence Then, turning to Karna, like a charioteer swiftly plucking irregular strands of hair from a horse's tail, he fired a volley of words "So this is the gross, cheap ruse devised by this son of a charioteer to take revenge on me? He couldn't take it out on the Pandavas, so he uses you to do this to me! King, you are asking a highborn Kshatriya to accept the reins of a son of a charioteer! Am I expected to hold the reins for a man who should be driving our chariots? It's a grave mistake on your part—a very wrong thing you have done—to hand over command of the army to him when I still happen to be around!" Shalya roared

Karna kept calm No flicker of feeling He kept staring out of the screened window at the darkness outside

"Raja of Madra, the Kauravas for whose sake you are here to fight today are the very ones who have accorded the full honours of Kshatriyahood to the Raja of Anga in the presence of the citizens of Hastinapura—*they* have installed him their Commander-in-Chief And don't forget that all the rajas who have come as allies of the Kauravas are here because of the success of Karna's world-conquest Had I the chance, and had I the power, you would have seen Karna, the Raja of Anga, installed Commander-in-Chief on the very first day of battle If I had the skills of a charioteer, I would gladly have accepted the reins of his chariot I leave it entirely to you As the eldest prince of the Kauravas, I make this earnest appeal to you, because on the strength of your skills as a charioteer depend the lives of hundreds of thousands of Kaurava soldiers " Duryodhana made his final request

Shalya, upset, was briefly lost in thought, he stared fixedly at Karna's narrow feet He blinked his eyes Wrinkles creased his forehead After deep reflection, he said, "I am ready, Raja of the Kauravas " As he emerged from the tent, he did not flick the end of his shawl haughtily

Hardly had he left than Duryodhana strode up to Karna and held Karna's strong arms in his hands

"Raja of Anga, what Grandsire Bhishma could not achieve, what Guru Drona failed to accomplish, you will accomplish tomorrow Remember the broken and shattered bowman Karna under the garland of blue lotuses in the arena? Remember brave Karna, seeing the reflection of his ink-black face in the sacred fire-pit of the *svayamvara* hall in the city of Kampilya? Remember the flames on the pyre of Sudamana on the bank of the Ganga? Remember Shon's helmeted head? You remember, don't you? The agonising ends of Grandsire Bhishma, Guru Drona, Shon and Satyasena? Raja of Anga, see to it that Arjuna's bow-string is so snapped tomorrow that it winds around his blue neck and strangles him That blue-skinned driver of his should not even realise that Arjuna has turned blue-black, suffocated, and fallen Speak, Raja of Anga!" He shook Karna by the arms His pink eyes surveyed Karna's broad forehead as if reading his own future

"Raja, I will do my life's best to see that victory is yours Go, and announce that all mendicants of neighbouring cities will be granted liberal charity tomorrow " His words reassured Duryodhana

Cheerfully adjusting his shawl, thumping Karna's arms, Duryodhana emerged from the tent Removing from its stand and holding aloft one of the flaming torches, Prabhanjana led the way Both shapes entered and disappeared in Duryodhana's tent The night of the sixteenth day, the second day of the bright fortnight As if sensing what lay in the womb of tomorrow, the wind blowing over the Drishadvati clapped its hands softly to lull the Kurukshetra-child to sleep in the river's lap But sleep did not come to Kurukshetra Nor was it going to come

My spy brought me all this information with all possible speed Listening to it I heard someone laugh and remark, "We should despatch Nakula and Sahadeva to Maharaja Shalya's tent, remind him of our silken family links, and win him over to our side And if that doesn't work, then Shalya should be advised to mock and distract Karna with insulting remarks about his low birth while driving his chariot and so break his single minded battle-dedication " What a weird suggestion!

The giver of this gratuitous advice had no idea that a self-respecting Raja of Shalya's stature could not even think of sullying his Kshatriyahood with such shameful conduct Not even under the spell of family sentiment If that had been his intention, he would have betrayed the Kauravas much earlier during the ferocious sixteen-day war Had he been against Kauravan principles, he could easily have returned with his army to the kingdom of Madra

So far, in the war, one had indeed witnessed once-forgivable brutality repeated—but no betrayal

In any case, no matter what Shalya did, Karna's resolve was absolute, unbreakable Karna on the battlefield was going to prove a master of over-kill carnage—for wasn't he the Karna who could not be deflected from his purpose by the lady who gave him birth who informed him of his blood tie with the other Pandavas, wasn't he the same Karna who in spite of what I offered him could not be swerved from his loyalty to the Kauravas? This was the Karna who had turned down the advice of Grandsire Bhishma given from a death-bed of arrows with the same fixity of resolve that made him gift away his flesh ear-rings and skin armour How could this Karna who knew he was the son of the Sun-God allow his radiance to be tarnished by a person like Shalya?

No defection was possible. Not by Shalya, and not by Karna

I advised all to go to sleep peacefully I knew that though the dark fortnight of Amavasya was over, ahead of us lay darker nights

The seventeenth day of battle dawned, the third of the bright fortnight Both armies had dwindled to less than half their original strengths Many tents had become soldierless voids Like stables bereft of horses

In the first flush of dawn, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kauravas, the first-born Pandava, Karna climbed a tall mound to survey the day's topography For the past sixteen days he had kept track of the ebb and flow of battles from this very mound, for which reason the place had been named the "Karna-Lookout" Because drum-beats had announced the charity-giving, the entire area of the mound swarmed with mendicants Gold plates and salvers of variegated sizes and shapes, heaped with diamonds, cat's-eyes, pearls, rubies, *pravalas* and other precious stones, were placed all around Karna had decided to liberally give away the remainder of the treasure that he had acquired from his world-conquest His head wore a diadem identical to mine On his wrists were stringed tuberoses

As soon as the auspicious time indicated by the royal *purohita* approached, Karna pushed his rose-red hands inside the heaps of diamonds and rubies Giving away fistfuls of gems to each mendicant, he folded his palms and humbly honoured them His head—which had not bowed even before Jarasandha, before such illustrious rajas as Shalya, Shighra, Rukmaratha, before the valiant Pandavas, not even before me except on one or two occasions, and not even before Jamadagni's son Parashurama at the time of trial—his sturdy, round, gold-complexioned, sunflower-like head, with its diadem, now bowed to each village mendicant with sincere humility Why? What did he have in mind? I felt I knew Because because the undemanding spontaneous wishes of a supplicant are always superior to expected blessings He wanted the blessings of simple ordinary people, offered to a simple ordinary soldier

His charity-giving was nearly over, but the golden rays of the sun did not shower *parijata*-blossoms on Kurukshetra, as always earlier The blue sky swarmed with dark clouds Even the flocks of birds that nested in the kadambas, acacias, mahuas, *kimshukas*

and other trees that ringed Kurukshetra, trilling varied melodies at sunrise, were mute or chirping half heartedly, inside their beaks, so it seemed The plants and creepers of Kurukshetra, joyously burgeoning at sunrise, were today hanging their heads, looking sleepy and desiccated There were no dewdrops of autumn sparkling on them Nor would they sparkle Because life itself was looking lifeless

8

Today's battle-site the foothill of a high peak named Amina From the west streamed the armies of the Pandavas, and from the east the armies of the Kauravas, gathering near the site On all four sides of Kurukshetra the soldiers of all the kingdoms of Aryavarta—Madra, Magadha, Matsya, Mathura, Malava, Vatsa, Vanga, Videha, Vidarbha, Kulinda, Kirata, Kashi, Koshala, Kamboja, Kamarupa, Nishadha, Abhira, and Gandhara—had assembled, curious to witness the outcome of the battle, all were ready to fight with single-minded dedication Honouring the field of battle were the multi coloured and multi shaped flags of all the capitals—Shakala, Girivraja, Viratnagar, Avanti, Prayaga, Tamranagara, Kusumapura, Kundinapura, Chandanavati, Kash thamandapa, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Champavati, Mahishmati, and Pushkaravati

Today the Kaurava forces had chosen a circular battle formation, resembling the disc of the sun A formation that stretched in circumference for many *yojanas* behind the Jaitra chariot of the Commander-in-Chief Karna Paying homage to his Jaitra chariot, Karna circumambulated it With eyes closed, he chanted shlokas in praise of the sun

Behind Arjuna's Nandighosha-chariot stood the Pandava forces arranged in the shape of a bull, the vehicle of the god of death Yama Its rear-most section stretched as far as the very edge of the foothill

The rear of the Jaitra-chariot was packed with all manner of weapons including spears, javelins, shields, maces, divine missiles, swords, chakras, throw-sticks, fire-guns, and varied arrows Waving atop the chariot was the war-flag, with a chain shaped stick symbol His wrist braceleted with strings of large tuberoses, Karna placed his right foot on the foot-step of the chariot and

climbed inside His weight made the chariot bells tinkle, the flower garlands sway, the elephant chain on top of the chariot and the stick-symbolled flag shook briefly, then became still As soon as the Commander-in-Chief mounted Jaitra, his charioteer Shalya rushed to the front of the vehicle He picked up tall horses' reins, which looked like elephant tusks One horse was exceptionally tall Shalya held the whip, which was encased in tiger-skin

Shalya as charioteer! I laughed to myself Time had taken a terrible revenge against Shalya!

I shouted to Arjuna, standing at the head of the Pandava forces, to mount his chariot, but he remained immobile He was not going to do so until I gripped the reins of the Nandighosha chariot and held the whip I smiled, and climbed the Nandighosha, deliberately left foot first Picking up the whip, I flicked it strongly

The moment I blew war-cries out of my white Panchajanya conch, Arjuna climbed into the chariot Blowing his own Devadatta conch in faultless harmony with mine, he screamed peal after peal

This was the first time our armies shouted victory cries using both our names The victory shouts bounced against the hill and reverberated through the Pandava ranks All Kurukshetra echoed with the cries

The sky was still overcast The only way for it to clear up was through victory shouts piercing the firmament The Commander-in Chief of the Kauravas heard the war-cries of the Pandavas and seemed to blossom like a sunflower radiant in sunlight—he was now not just Karna, not the son of Radha, not the son of Kunti—he had shed his family ties long ago as he had discarded his skin-armour and flesh ear-rings He was now simply the Commander-in Chief—simply the refulgent son of the Sun For an instant he glanced in the direction of the obscured eastern horizon

Holding his white, huge Hiranyagarbha conch firmly in both hands, he gazed once at the sprawling circular array of the Pandava forces The next moment his neck, thick as a healthy elephant's leg, swelled His veins became taut Inhaling deeply in his massive chest, he blew celestial peals from his Hiranyagarbha conch Even I was not familiar with these peals that inspired and excited the assembled soldiers His peals cut through the din of tabors, *dundhubi*, *dimdim* and *mridanga* drums, and reached me in the Pandava camp They were not sounds, they were dazzling streams of light

Lifting repeatedly his Bow of Victory in his right hand, and ordering "Forward march! Attack", he advanced like the ocean agitated on a moonless night Like the death-music of a raging forest fire Like a bolt of lightning. Like a volcano consuming everything around it Like a second sun, keeping in mind a son's duty, as if bent on fulfilling the task of a shrouded sun to make red-hot the field of Kurukshetra

None except I in the countless ranks of the Kauravas and Pandavas knew that Karna was the son of Surya The Kaurava warriors were glorifying him as the Raja of Anga The Pandava warriors described him as the son of Radha and tried thereby to reassure their agitated minds that they had nothing to fear so far as his military prowess was concerned There was no one calling him the son of Surya Nonetheless, now fully aware of his identity, the son of Surya, the resolute, unparalleled warrior, intolerant and quick to take affront, on his own, all by himself, a hero of charities, advanced inexorably

Supporting him, the Kauravas advanced also—his sons Vrishasena and Chitrasena, Ashvatthaman, Shakuni, Duhshasana, Kripa, Duryodhana, Kritavarman and others

I alighted from the Nandighosha, went inside the tent, and fetched the oil-vessel with which to lubricate the wheels The warriors assigned to protect the Nandighosha rushed forward, among them were Bhima, Satyaki, Uttamaujas, Dhrishtadyumna, Nakula, Sahadeva, Yuyudhana Clouds of dust obscured the sky War-drums, victory-cries, the trumpeting of elephants, the neighing of horses, the clatter of chariot-wheels, the twang of taut bow-strings—all these combined to produce an eerie cacophony which reverberated as it echoed against the hill called Amina The flicking of whips mingled with the whinnying of steeds Like two flocks of Garuda birds approaching from opposite directions and clashing with an uproarious clamour of fluttering wings, the warriors of the armies shot their arrows at each other, colliding head-on Soldier grappled with soldier The battle began

Empty wine jars, flung from speeding chariots, rolled on the field of Kurukshetra Many chariots lost control as they struck the jars, and as a result of horse-riders toppling over them from behind, they were reduced to smithereens Karna's chariot, pulled by five swan-white horses, was manoeuvred so skilfully across the bumpy terrain that the foe-destroying heroic son of Surya, poised

one instant at one corner of the field, had, in the next instant, before anyone could make out, slipped into the ranks of the Pandava cavalry, elephants and foot-soldiers That fearless Commander-in-Chief was issuing orders so loudly that the un-horsed and unchariored Kaurava warriors were inspired and stood up to fight again They fell upon the Panchalas with whatever vehicle they could mount Karna advanced like a mighty river that proceeds to join the ocean accompanied by myriads of doom-dancing waves, accompanying him were wine-and-war intoxicated elephants, headed by thousands of agitated troops, contemptuous of cavalry and foot-soldiers On his right was Chitrasena, and on his left Prasena, behind him was Vrishasena His three illustrious sons advanced with him, giving protective cover

One got the impression that the Sun itself was launching an attack with its array of sunrays

Seeing Karna advancing, I halted Arjuna's chariot midway, in order to delay the troops of Hastinapura who were following us I knew that his blue eyes had unerringly singled me out, and he was concentrating on attacking Arjuna His restless movements made that clear enough

As he approached nearer, Dhrishtadyumna, who protected our left flank, in a swift action manoeuvred his Panchala forces to a position in front of our army I had advised this primary tactic to Dhrishtadyumna the previous night Exactly as planned, he stationed his Panchala forces to receive the brunt of Karna's volcanic thrust Seeing the Panchala troops suddenly facing him, Karna plunged within the enemy ranks like a wounded, maddened elephant splashing in the waters of a lake Lifting high his Bow of Victory, Karna let loose endless volley upon volley of venomous arrows upon the countless Panchala elephant ranks—like rain showering at the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation The venom made the elephants run helter-skelter Their rancous trumpeting made it impossible for anyone to guess what was happening within the Panchala ranks Clouds of dust dimmed the sky even more thickly

Karna, son of Surya, appeared now in the shape of Death to those Panchala warriors who, at the time of Draupadi's *svayamvara*, made fun of his humiliation in the open assembly, and they screamed for fear of their lives Like a *yajna*-fire reducing a bundle of firewood to ashes, his fiery arrows consumed the Panchala

heroes Karna, son of Radha, looked as fearful and incandescent as a flame-of-the-forest whose every branch is laden with blood red flowers, or as flocks upon flocks of red *saranga* birds Like a bush-fire at the foot of a mountain streaking towards the forest, fearless Karna scorched the protecting Panchala ranks one by one and, exhorting the warriors behind him, kept advancing

He had cast off all confusions that had so far been troubling his mind Only one idea gripped him now—the easily heady thought of war. Like a furious, famished, roaring lion pouncing on a herd of wild horses grazing in a pasture, he penetrated into the Panchala ranks

In less than half an hour he had decimated the Panchala vanguard His arrows fell like swarms of locusts, they showered like a continuous torrent of rain during the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation He kept shooting as many arrows, five or even six, simultaneously as could be held and nocked by the four fingers of his right hand—and the shafts sped from his heavy bow in all four directions in the twinkling of an eye It was impossible to tell when he pulled the arrows out of its quiver and when he strung them on his bow and took aim Like grass on the surface of a flowing stream, moving in unbroken continuity, his hands and eyes worked in a single fluid motion while shooting arrows Every second the battered Panchalas withdrew step by step The ranks broke Dhrishtadyumna, leader of the Panchalas, began to retreat

To prevent the rout of the Panchalas, the Raja of Chedi, Satyaki and the Pandava regiment of Indraprastha rushed to their help But, just as in times of high tide, the ocean rejects the entry of streams from outside, the first Pandava, long armed Karna, repulsed the Pandava reinforcements Piercing the elephant ranks of the Chedis, he bewildered them totally, so that they were unable to tell enemy from friend In the first hour of battle itself, Karna decapitated the illustrious Panchala heroes—Bhanudeva, Chitrasena, Senabindu Tapana and Shurasena Hundreds and thousands of Chedi warriors and Satyaki were trampled beneath the wheels of his tall chariot Screaming "Kill! Kill!" , he careened through the four-fold army ranks like a bolt of lightning freely coursing through the sky mandala

I carefully manoeuvred the regiment of Arjuna out of the rear of the Panchala army, and brought it into headlong clash with the suicide squad called the Samshaptakas Arjuna's invincible arrows

whizzed above my head and the Samshaptakas fled wherever they found escape outlets Arjuna's soldiers pursued them, making them arrow-targets

9

Demolishing the vanguard of the formation, Karna penetrated deep inside and clashed with Yudhishthira The instant he glimpsed dharma-loving Yudhishthira's chariot, he toppled Yudhishthira's white chariot-pennant with his very first arrow A peacock shorn of its crest, Yudhishthira's chariot veered skilfully right and left in order to shake off Karna But Karna confronted it in every direction Avoiding aiming at the body itself, Karna shot arrows so accurately at the chariot poles and mouths of the wooden quivers that Yudhishthira was unable to move even though he had his bow at the ready Harassing Yudhishthira interminably, he hurled Yudhishthira's charioteer Indrasena out of the vehicle Indrasena fell down, dead

Rushing to Yudhishthira's help in a body came Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, the five sons of Draupadi, Shikhandin, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva But Karna, son of Radha, pierced through the ring around Yudhishthira so expertly that they never got a chance to regroup and attack unitedly

After the first three hours of battle, the sky began to clear The field of Kurukshetra filled with light Surya, the sky-emperor, the dispenser of life-giving radiance to all animate and inanimate creatures, stood on the eastern horizon Karna experienced the heat of the sun on his arm, and for an instant stopped shooting with his Bow of Victory His eyes became, as it were, mouths which gulped the rays of the sun Those rays were like wine to him Seeing his Bow of Victory inactive, his charioteer Shalya cautioned him, saying, "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" Shalya did not know the truth of his identity—even had he known, he would not have believed it

The darshan of the Sun transported not only the body but the mind of heroic Karna also into rapture The battlefield in front of that golden sky-hero became, as it were, something as trivial and contemptible as a blade of grass Shooting arrows as multicoloured as the feathers of the sheldrake, that super-hero, that *prabhadraka* Karna, roaring like a lion, swooped within the ranks of the Chedis and Panchalas

Observing that Karna was engrossed in battle, the mighty hero Bhima seized this occasion to rout the thousands upon thousands of the Kaurava ranks of Madra, Gandhara, Saindhava and others like an ocean flooding its boundaries at high tide Anguished by the thought that Karna had killed his powerful son Ghatotkacha, the wind-god's son Bhima surveyed the battle area searching for an opportunity to crush Karna's son in his incredibly strong arms And that opportunity came his way

Lost in the confusion of battle, getting separated more and more each minute from Karna, Prasena unluckily came within range of Bhima, right in front of him He appeared in front of Bhima like a hill of the Nishadha range compared to a long, broad and towering mountain of the Himalayas But he stood there, firm, like a Nishadha hill, confronting Bhima That illustrious heroic son of Karna fought Bhima for half an hour or so, and was felled finally by a moon-shaped arrow shot by Bhima He lay on the ground, flailing in fatal agony

"Prasena's fallen! Prasena's fallen! Killed by Bhima!" The news spread from mouth to mouth till it reached the ears of Karna

Pushing back the forces of the Chedis and Panchalas, and keeping an eye on the war-flag of Bhima, he arrived at the spot where his dead son lay The sight of the corpse made the Bow of Victory shake in his hands, the next instant it slipped from his grip and fell on the ground

"Prasena! Prasena!" he shouted and leapt down from his chariot Turning the body of his dead son face upwards, he cupped the dust-smeared countenance in his hands The tears that streamed down Karna's face washed away the clotted dust on his son's face A few of the burning tear drops mingled in the earth of Kurukshetra

He stood up, and gazed briefly at the sky The Kaurava corpse-bearers removed the limp lifeless body lying in the long straddling shadow of Karna's massive frame Karna firmly turned his back to face the bitter reality of life, to face the fact of this world of maya which ensnares warriors all the time and at every step in the noose of death He ran and leapt into his chariot with the speed of a tiger pouncing on the neck of an elephant The chariot wheels rattled forward The iron chains on the left wheel of the chariot were getting loose as a result of the friction generated by the bumpy drive over the small and large craters on the battlefield But Karna

had no time to pay attention to this. His eyes, emitting the fire of his wrath, sought Bhima, and Bhima only. Shalya's whip cracked repeatedly on the sun-glistening backs of the white chariot-horses.

A tremendous battle was raging in the left corner of the battle-field between his eldest son Vrishasena and Nakula. Even a Pandava like Nakula was unable to defeat Vrishasena. Fearlessly showing off his skill, Vrishasena singlemindedly used this opportunity of harassing Nakula. "I am Karna's son Vrishasena!" Teasing Nakula with these words, he kept the Pandava confused for a few hours with an incessant shower of arrows. Just as he had fled from Karna, Nakula had no option but to retreat from Vrishasena as well. He looked about desperately for help from any quarter. But he had no idea where Arjuna and the three other Pandavas were fighting. He blew soft, piteous calls on his conch for help. Immediately on hearing them, the mighty hero Satyaki rushed to give assistance. Satyaki was next in power after the Pandavas.

A gory duel followed between Satyaki and Vrishasena. In no time at all Satyaki rendered Vrishasena senseless with a poison-tipped arrow. The tired eldest son of Karna crashed in the chariot like a boulder falling down a hill. Duhshasana quickly removed the unconscious Vrishasena from the field. Not because he had any special love for Vrishasena, but because he wanted to be as far away from Bhima as possible.

Karna next pounced on the re-grouped remnants of the Chedi elephant force. The few surviving elephants ran helter-skelter across the field, trumpeting with uplifted trunks. The Pandava leaders Dhrishtadyumna, Uttamaujas, Satyaki and Yuyudhana were unable to withstand the fiery onslaught. Karna had become an irresistible and invincible force.

Crushing with his mace the four-fold armies of the Vasatyas, Nishadhas and Saindhavas, Bhima danced crazily across the field and screamed his challenge to Karna: "Where is Duhshasana? Where is he?"

Decimating the suicide squad of Samshaptakas under the command of Susharma, our chariot, the Nandighosha, had penetrated more than half of the Solar Formation of the Kauravas.

Only three brave heroes still roamed freely on the field of Kurukshetra, amid the chaotic war-cries that resounded at the foot of the Amina hill. The armies sent to fight them began retreating.

The field was filled with broken army ranks like swarms of bees. Like flocks of birds squabbling on fruit-laden trees in springtime, the warriors of both camps attacked each other indiscriminately. None except Karna and the Pandava heroes on their high chariots knew who was fighting who, and where.

10

Urged by desire to avenge his defeat, Yudhishthira once again faced Karna on the battlefield, supported this time by the Dravida and Nishadha forces. However, that mighty chariot-hero, incensed by the death of his son, at the very outset succeeded in felling two of Yudhishthira's flank protectors, Dandadhara and Chandra-deva. Irritated by the inadequacy of his valour, Yudhishthira clashed furiously with Karna's chariot. Never in the seventeen days of battle had Yudhishthira been so wrathful.

Shouting "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" he obscured Karna's chariot with a torrent of arrows.

"Useless, good-for-nothing Kshatriya!" Karna shouted and scattered the swarm of arrows in an instant.

Reaching into his quiver and selecting the required arrows by the smooth feel of their ends—*naracha*, snake-mouthed, kite-backed, *jihma*, *sanatparva*, grindstone-sharpened, *bastika*—he shot them at Yudhishthira with the ferocity of frost freezing a Himalayan hill. Satyaki and Yuyutsu sped to his help, but none was able to withstand the onslaught of the invincible Kaurava general, Karna.

Harassed by Karna's arrows, Yudhishthira, Satyaki and Yuyutsu climbed into the same chariot and again fled from the field. As he retreated, Yudhishthira shot an arrow that penetrated a vulnerable spot near Karna's ear. Not one of the three turned back to see if he had fallen unconscious or not. Karna dropped down, senseless.

Shalya removed the arrow from the head of Karna. He sprinkled a few drops of water from the leather-bag kept in the chariot, and Karna revived after a few moments. The passion for war that glowed on his face had not faded the least bit—nor was it likely to fade.

Having fled from Karna on the battlefield, Yudhishthira went and cooped himself up silently in his tent. Fearing that he was

wounded, Arjuna's worry made his aim erratic Until he could be certain that Yudhishthira was unharmed, his mind would not stabilise Slowing down the speed of the Nandighosha chariot, I tried to manoeuvre it out of the field I halted the vehicle in front of Yudhishthira's tent The clatter of the chariot wheels made Yudhishthira come out of his tent He thought that his dear brother Arjuna had arrived to give the news that he had killed Karna who was wreaking such havoc in the Pandava ranks

The very instant Arjuna with bent head said that he had not even come face to face with Karna on the battlefield, Yudhishthira, famed for his equanimity, quailed

"Why don't you throw the Gandiva in Kurukshetra's Surya Pit?" No sooner had Yudhishthira angrily uttered these words than Arjuna, lifting his Gandiva bow, pounced on his eldest brother whom he had respected all his life almost like a father Arjuna was filled with a burning anger that surpassed even the anger of Ashvatthaman attacking Karna

There are some occasions which seem to be perfect tests of the limits of a man's self control Such an occasion now presented itself before Yudhishthira and Arjuna

I stepped between the two sons of Kunti and pacified them "I will not turn in the direction of my tent without first killing Karna " Taking this fierce vow, Arjuna re-ascended his chariot I smiled to myself As always

On the field itself battled Karna and Satyaki Experienced Satyaki and undefeated Karna collided like two masses of black clouds driven by strong winds from the east In the sixteen days of battle so far, Satyaki had remained undefeated He was the unpiercable defence of the Pandavas But today Karna humbled Satyaki whom even Bhishma and Drona had failed to vanquish

Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhrishtadyumna encircled Duryodhana Each throw of the war-dice turned against him but, straight and tall like the wild *keora*-tree, arrogant Duryodhana rolled his wide-open eyes and determinedly fought with his three antagonists Recalling the agony of victimised Draupadi, and determined to revenge the insult to his sister, Dhrishtadyumna rushed at Duryodhana with two upraised swords like the bared fangs of a hunted beast In a flash he leapt up and gashed the neck of the charioteer Pratikaman and, with Duryodhana as target, he kept circling the chariot That very instant, the person responsible for

the universal doom, that mighty banyan-huge arrogant Duryodhana began blowing his conch to signal Karna for assistance, because Karna was the only one he could fall back on. Since he had given word to protect Duryodhana to the last, the firm-vowed hero of charities immediately turned away from Satyaki in order to help his benefactor. All eight mighty chariot-heroes who had turned up to prevent his coming together with Duryodhana on the battlefield—Vyaghraketu, Susharma, Chitra, Ugragudha, Jaya, Shukla, Rochaman, and Singhasena—were despatched by Karna to the other world.

His white chariot steeds galloped so swiftly that they appeared to be a never-ending strip of white cloth. One instant he had covered the area from east to west; the other instant from south to north—he traversed the field like the king of birds Garuda soaring freely in the sky.

In the gory clash that was taking place around Duryodhana, he unchärioted the great heroes Jishnu, Jishnukarma, Devapi and Danda. The Pandava warriors had no idea where Karna would strike next and when. His arrows sped unobstructed like flocks of birds migrating over the sea in autumn. He was the complete master of five slaves: speed, strength, shape, impact, direction. He approached with a great clatter of chariot-wheels like a desert storm. Body bleeding with innumerable wounds, like the Gairika hill streaming in the monsoon with red liquid flowing from crimson stone-clusters, he pushed ahead. The beads of sweat from his shorn ears mixed with the blood from the wounds on his body. They streamed off the chariot and dripped on the field of Kurukshetra. Even though Karna's forehead was bathed in sweat while he rained arrows at his foes, Shalya refused to believe that he was the finest Kshatriya of them all. Shouting "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" he kept asking for instructions in which direction to attack. Karna's muscular arms moved faster and faster in relation to the rise of the ascending sun.

The sun was now directly overhead. The disproportionate slanting shadows of the warriors were now perpendicular. Unable to endure the intense heat of the sun, wounded soldiers dragged themselves to shelter under half-smashed chariots. The severed tails of horses and sliced elephant trunks lying in that bubbling bog of flesh and blood, and soldiers flailing their legs and arms testified to life's extraordinary powers of survival. Karna had decimated the Pandava ranks.

Taking with him Vrishasena, who had recovered his senses, Duhshasana plunged into the confused ocean of the Kaurava army like a swift river, and reached the spot where he should not have—where a tumultuous battle was being fought between Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni on one side and Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhrishtadyumna on the other Like a black deer going to drink water in front of a lion

Like a mongoose puffing up the hair on its body and screeching and leaping angrily when facing a venomous snake, Bhima swelled his chest and leapt in his chariot when he confronted Duhshasana, and uttered a sky-rending scream Such a harsh and piercing scream that all the warriors, perplexed, froze, weapons in hand, wondering what had happened Even Bhima's sturdy, sweat covered russet horses, stunned by that fearful noise, bent their knees and abruptly sat on the ground His charioteer, Vishoka, alighted from the vehicle, caressed them, and somehow or other succeeded in getting them on their feet again As a result of his incessant wine-drinking, Bhima's red-rimmed eyes had become even more red And when he saw Duhshasana in front of him, the blood coursing even faster in his veins made them even more frightfully red The hairs on his thick moustache became stiff His large nostrils flared Beads of sweat glistened on his face, round as a water-pot Steeling his large jaw, he shouted, "Stop, you low-born scum!"

Inflamed Bhima totally forgot that he was a vulnerable target for the variegated weapons in the chariots of Karna, Shakuni, Kripa, and Ashvatthaman Pushing aside Vishoka, he took the reins in his own hands

Indiscriminately crushing under his chariot the Kauravas as well as many of his own ranks, he reached Duhshasana in no time at all Because his mind was fixed on revenge, Vayu's son Bhima let loose an explosive peal of laughter The cruelty in that laugh numbed Duhshasana's hands and feet *Best to escape if possible from an avalanche of rocks*—thinking this, Duhshasana curled up his body in his chariot like a hawk folding its wings in its nest Like a leaning tower somehow standing up against a battering storm—such was the condition of Duhshasana The same Duhshasana who, after the post-gambling disrobing of Draupadi, had neighed like a wild horse was now cowering for shelter like a wild cat No Kaurava soldier nearby had the courage to block Bhima, who

charged on Duhshasana like a bull in an open field. Bhima's entire frame was now like a veritable cyclone. Screaming "Lowborn Duhshasana!" he dashed straight into Duhshasana's chariot.

Duhshasana gripped his chariot's firm flagpole. He was in no mood to alight. Bhima dragged him out.

Duhshasana had dragged out Draupadi from the midst of the royal ladies. Now, from the midst of the Kaurava warriors, hugely powerful Bhima dragged Duhshasana out of his chariot, like a burly peasant dragging away by the neck a bull that has intruded into a field of ripe corn. Furious Bhima kicked on top of him the mace that had rolled down from his chariot. Bewildered Duhshasana managed somehow to endure the assault.

A horripilating mace-duel commenced. Sparks flew from the clashing maces. Sparks of anger scattered from their wrathful eyes that glared death at each other. Keenly eyeing each other to find a fatal spot, briefly pausing, carefully lifting each foot, they struck mace against mace, like the crackle of lightning, whenever they got the chance. Duhshasana attacked first, crouching to pounce like a cheetah. But he did not know that Bhima, who looked so huge and bulky, could become even more swift than wind-vibrations as soon as he heard the swish of a mace.

For half an hour they were oblivious of the existence of lakhs of warriors on the field of Kurukshetra

Finally Bhima felled him to the ground with a shattering blow. Immoral, huge-bodied Duhshasana dropped like a thorny cotton tree uprooted by a storm. Bhima flung aside his mace, sprinted forward, screaming, and with both hands gripped Duhshasana's mace-hand tightly. He stamped his heavy right foot, as large as an elephant's, on the right arm of Duhshasana. At that time he looked like the fearsome Dwarf Avatara of Vishnu pressing his foot on the third world. The mace fell from Duhshasana's hand.

Bhima twisted Duhshasana's arm at the shoulder before wrenching it off. "This very instant I will fling into the sky this sinful arm that dared to touch Draupadi's pure body!" Closing his eyes, and screaming, that hugely-powerful mace-hero, with one swift jerk, uprooted Duhshasana's arm from the shoulder-blade, like a Kirata tribal wrenching out a creeper from the soil. Maddened, he looked up skywards and, whirling that variously-ornamented wicked arm, hurled it in the far distance like a mace that's hurled at a warrior. All the soldiers on the field horripilated.

But that was not enough to satisfy the rage of Bhima who was not in control of himself He picked up the mace that had slipped from Duhshasana's hand Lifting it high, he brought it down in a devastating blow at agonising Duhshasana's chest The chest was pulped like an ant-heap crushed under a musth elephant's foot Fountains of blood spirted, tears gushed forth Horripilating cries broke out all over

Flinging aside the mace, Bhima knelt on the ground "Come, try and stop this king of the forest from drinking the blood of this wild beast " He shouted this to the Kaurava warriors assembled near and far Duryodhana, Shakuni, Kripa, Ashvatthaman, and Karna His red eyes emitted sparks of anger even more than theirs

Like a thirsty lion thrusting his muzzle in a stream near a ghat, Bhima thrust his round lion like face in the flowing blood in Duhshasana's chest and, shaking Duhshasana's massive body back and forth, he gulped warm mouthfuls of blood as if he was drinking *maireyaka* wine from a barrel Everyone's hackles rose

They covered their eyes with their hands Many fainted My hands, which held the Nandighosha chariot reins, remained steady

The intoxication of Duhshasana's blood went to Bhima's head even more powerfully than *maireyaka* wine Flailing his blood drenched arms he ran from the battlefield to the tents, shouting "Draupadi! Draupadi! ' Early in the morning he had arranged to bring Draupadi to his tent He was ready to fulfil his gruesome vow of smearing the black tresses of Draupadi with Duhshasana's blood He was going to dress her thick, long black hair, which since the incident of the disrobing she had kept untied, he was ready now, after so many years, to personally comb her hair With wrathful Bhima's departure from the battlefield, the soldiers standing nearby heaved a sigh of relief

11

Impossible now to predict what could happen—and how—on the field of battle Impossible to tell when the instinctive emotions of fear, cruelty and bravery would explode The *yajna*-pit of war was now transformed into an all consuming holocaust

Bhima, Karna, Arjuna—these three alone had despatched lakhs of warriors to the realm of Yama Even a glimpse of any of these three sent soldiers scurrying away in confusion

Every minute saw the squelchy filthy mess of blood and flesh slipping under the feet of horses, elephants and chariot-wheels, and sliding in the low-lying region of the south, where a coagulated bog had already formed. No charioteer, however expert, was willing to drive in that direction.

On the right, the battle between Nakula and Karna's son Vrishasena had reached its peak, with neither warrior acknowledging defeat.

After adorning Draupadi's hair, Bhima returned to battle with Karna.

As soon as they saw each other, they clashed like two rutting elephants competing for a she-elephant on Shatashringa hill. Both were incomparably skilled, expert in war, fearless and fearsome. Karna's golden skin shone like sunrays. Bhima's blood-red complexion glowed like a blossoming flame-of-the-forest. They pounced on each other like two mighty rivers colliding from opposite directions. Bhima's mind bore a grudge on account of Ghatotkacha. Karna's mind rankled with the memory of the incident in the arena regarding the whip and Bhima's slaughter of his son.

Like meteors colliding mid-sky, they attacked each other. Spears, javelins, chakras, maces, swords—they used whatever they could lay hands on, with an eye on striking any exposed fatal spot. Karna had many opportunities of shooting life-consuming arrows at Bhima. But he deliberately refrained from aiming at any place other than Bhima's muscular arms and thighs. Off and on, wounded severely, they lost consciousness. Inhaling reviving herbal drugs placed in their nostrils through hollow reeds by their charioteers, they sprang up like lions waking as if from sleep and recommenced their weapons' duel. None had the courage to enter their orbit of battle. For an hour or so, these two mighty warriors fought tirelessly like two mighty planets. Neither would admit defeat. The sparks never stopped emitting from their clashing steel weapons. The sharp, thorny duel, it seemed, would never end.

In the meantime Ashvatthaman raced his chariot until it faced Karna. "Raja of Anga, your son Vrishasena is trapped like a helpless sea-cow in the arrow-net of Arjuna. Run! Help him!" Without once looking back, adjusting his headgear that was flapping in the wind, Karna dashed to Vrishasena's rescue. A

dozen or so of Duryodhana's brothers who had survived pushed ahead and engaged Bhima, allowing Karna to proceed on his mission.

Somehow or other, Shalya succeeded in manoeuvring the chariot through the blood-filled bog in the southern region and brought it near the Pandavas who had surrounded Vrishasena, in the extreme southern tip.

The battlefield was now divided into two clear areas—the north with Bhima, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Sahadeva, Yudhishthira and their Kaurava opponents, the brothers of Duryodhana, Kripa, the Raja of Sindhu; and the south with Vrishasena, Ashvatthaman, Shakuni, Duryodhana and, surrounding them with Vrishasena as target, Arjuna, Nakula, Uttamaujas and others. In the second part, from the foot of the Amina hill to the ring around Vrishasena, was the bog of flesh and blood, where nothing moved.

Eager to rescue his son from Arjuna's arrow-net, Karna with great difficulty reached the ring around his son. By this time, Arjuna who had challenged Shakuni, Ashvatthaman and Duryodhana, approached Karna and said: "Son of a charioteer, I will kill your son Vrishasena in front of all of you today. Just as you killed my beloved son Abhi." He shot a moon-shaped arrow which severed the head of Vrishasena who looked like a proud antelope shrouded in the earlier arrow-swarm.

Countless warriors bit their tongues. The eldest son of Karna, Vrishasena, toppled.

The Pandava army blew a peal of trumpets behind us. Realising that it was not advisable to face Arjuna, the frightened Kaurava warriors became totally demoralised.

Seeing Vrishasena fall, Karna for the first time in his life lowered his head. Shalya halted his chariot near Vrishasena's corpse. Karna flung aside his bow and alighted. Like a lion shorn of his mane. Even that great hero was unable to prevent warm tears streaming from his blue eyes. He lifted Vrishasena's head. The hands that offered *arghya* worship to the Sun, the hands that donated liberally to supplicants and mendicants, the hands that lifted the Vijaya bow high today cradled the severed lotus-head of his beloved son, the focus of all his life's hopes and longings.

As he attached the head to Vrishasena's trunk, the son of Surya lost faith in love which was nourished so long by life's hopes and expectations. He stood up, totally renouncing, as it were, all the

deceitful affections of the world, all the high and low caste divisions, and all ego-ridden ambitions

Sobbing, he did *pradakshina* round his son's corpse His body was now a mass of fire No ties of any kind could now awaken tenderness in him Neither fame nor affection could now influence him He had only one kinship now—with the limitless, endless, infinite blue sky, and with the blazing brightly Sun

He bent low once more and smelt the crown of Vrishasena's head He rose, and let out a sky-rending roar "Atta-a-a-c-k!"

12

Fleeing from the onslaught of Arjuna, the Kaurava warriors suddenly stopped where they were, as stiff as nails They stopped, with the intention of attacking the Pandavas with renewed enthusiasm

Regrouping the survivors of the Kaurava army, Karna advanced towards our Nandighosha chariot like an ocean wind The third part of the day had begun I halted the Nandighosha at a strategic spot where Shalya would not be able to manoeuvre his chariot without driving through the southern blood and-flesh bog Clever Shalya circled the fringe of the bog to determine if there was a four-cubit patch of dry ground anywhere in that swampy mass Finally, he said in desperation to Karna "Son of Radha, today is not the right time to battle with Arjuna I sense danger in trying to drive through this bog "

Karna laughed, and kept laughing Without a word, he pointed a finger as an order to drive through the centre of the bog

Our chariot now faced theirs

Descending from the chariot I smeared a thick layer of grease on its wheels Supposing we had to enter the bog while chasing his chariot? At least the thick grease would prevent us getting stuck in the coagulated blood bones-and flesh of the bog I climbed back into the Nandighosha holding the wooden grease box Replacing the box in the hemp net, I picked up the whip

The excited warriors of both armies took the snapped and crushed garlands from their chariots and showered the petals with victory shouts on their respective commanders One threw a sunflower garland accurately around the neck of Karna I removed my

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Peace for only an instant—and the next moment they roared with ear-splitting ferocity and loosed terrifying showers of arrows at each other Their arrows shot through the sky and it seemed to the warriors of both armies that the sky with all its constellations of stars was disintegrating above their heads Even I had not witnessed in the last sixteen days such a heart-shattering arrow-shower The duel between these two warriors was infinitely more cataclysmic than the clashes of Bhishma, Drona, and Abhimanyu All were stunned with wonder

Their arrows were as countless as swarms of insects Like multi-coloured horses galloping freely out of stables as soon as the gates are opened, the arrows shot out of the bow-strings instantaneously, it seemed Countless warriors fell victim to the sharp arrows Both armies began diminishing, like melting Himalayan snows in summer

Like lakhs of pure-white swans swooping into the sky when a snow peak cracks and falls into Lake Manasarovara, their pure-white *jihma* shafts sped swiftly from their massive bows Twisting, screeching, zig-zagging, they collided with each other, and the sky was radiantly illuminated with the star-bright sparks that were emitted

Hundreds and thousands of *kapisha*-arrows shot in the sky rained like the Mriga constellation on their enemies Shooting white, lightning-like, zig-zagging *jihma* arrows at each other's army leaders, they started decimating the armies The soldiers were utterly at a loss regarding where the arrows were coming from Their arrows emerged like ants from an ant-hill Their countless dusky *kapisha*-arrows sped like flocks of Garuda-birds swirling away at the crackle of lightning from the ridges of the Shatashringa mountain on which they perch with sharp-taloned claws In an instant the entire sky was shrouded, and Kurukshetra quaked

In order to incapacitate Karna's charioteer, Arjuna shot, above my head, swarms of arrows in the direction of his chariot steeds But but Shalya was a truly brilliant driver With a flick of the reins, he was making the five steeds bend knees and sit, and as suddenly making them leap as high as the base of the chariot's flag-pole And at times he turned the heavy weapons-loaded chariot driven by the five huge horses so swiftly that Arjuna's arrows missed their target and, thudding against the steel casing of the rear of the chariot, sizzled in a shower of angry sparks in the bog

blue lotus garland from my neck and from where I stood I placed it round Arjuna's blue neck Today was my testing time as well Yes, the acid test

The acid test was Should I see to it that the first son of Kunti—the most idealistic of idealistic persons—was kept alive, or should I be more practical and save the lives of the five Pandava brothers? I was on the side of being practical, because if Arjuna fell all the other four brothers would certainly fall too

When I pummelled my maternal uncle Kansa to death, my arms did not tremble or waver My heart didn't palpitate when I meted out punishment to Dantavakra, Viduratha, Shrigala, Shalva and Paundraka My eyes did not get moist when I released my Sudarshana chakra at my cousin Shishupala But today today I could feel clearly the reins of the Nandighosha quivering, as it were, in my grip Because because I knew that though, as a result of his cruel humiliation, that hero of charities at times had bitterly antagonised Bhishma, Arjuna, Bhima and even Draupadi, still for me he had a deep, unshakeable bhakti, which I had experienced at the time of our meeting when uncontrollable tears from his eyes dropped on the runnel of my blue-skinned back I knew fully well the silent relationship between him and the mother-like Rajmata Kunti Devi There were only four people in my life for whom I had silent bhakti brimful of love and sacrifice my mother Devaki, the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, Karna, and Radha of Gokula

To still the whirlpool of my thoughts, I blew very loudly into my conch the Panchajanya

Slapping their strong sandal paste smeared arms, nostrils flaring, Karna and Arjuna sounded their conches The nearby hill trembled at the noise of the war trumpets of both armies They faced each other like two high, white peaks of the Himalayas Their piercing pupils focused on each other's arms, trying to anticipate from the slightest movement of the opponent's hand which arrow he would be nocking The commingled noise of various war instruments—tabors, trumpets, long drums, kettle-drums and tomtoms—rent the sky Karna closed his eyes for an instant and chanted a shloka to the Sun Arjuna closed his eyes also and murmured a shloka in my worship Placing the conches in their wooden holds, they readied themselves for weapons-combat

Shooting a volley of arrows like a waterfall of Gangotri, Arjuna trapped Karna's charioteer Shalya into immobility, like a hawk in a cage That expert charioteer was unable now to move in any direction The Jaitra-chariot was right in front now—and rooted to the ground

Karna's special arrows whizzed past my coronet like flocks of *dhanachari*-birds He was careful not to aim even by mistake a single arrow at me throughout the entire course of the horrendous battle

Harassed Arjuna adjusted his head-vesture and began intoning the prelude mantra to the shooting of the Agni-missile Invigorated, Arjuna stood erect, like a straight-blossoming *anjani*-tree A mysterious celestial radiance seemed to flow from his countenance Like thousands of bright-red-tufted *karandava* birds sweeping down on the waters of the Drishadvati river, Arjuna's fire-arrows swooshed out of his Gandiva bow past my head, spitting flame as they sought their target The Kaurava soldiers fled, fearing that the entire cosmos had become a massive all consuming *yajna*-pit Many fainted, struck by the weird fear that the sun had melted and fallen on their bodies Arjuna's arrows rained molten fire

To frustrate Arjuna's fire-arrows, Karna knelt and, closing his eyes, intoned the mantras associated with the divine Varuna-arrows All the water of the *arghya*-offerings, which had trickled from his cupped hands, like a faithful servant now rushed to his aid in the form of dark clouds charged with doom-dancing lightning He selected deadly arrows backed with leather-feathers as large as elephant's ears, and shot them in such thick clusters that they blocked the free flow of wind on Kurukshetra In a second masses of black clouds ringed the battlefield Arjuna's flaming wrath, the source of his shooting his fire-arrows, was extinguished, together with the arrows, by torrential rain and thunder The great hero of charities, Karna, brought life back to half-dead wounded soldiers with his gift of rain

But but he was unaware of the fact that, as a result of the downpour brought about by his own Varuna-missiles, the bog around his chariot was becoming even more swampy

To disperse the rain-clouds created by Karna's Varuna-missiles, Arjuna resorted to a skilful use of his Wind missiles Whistling as they sped swiftly to their targets, the Wind missiles pierced and

All around the chariot the messy blood-and-gristle became even more squelchy and unmanoeuvrable To inspire and encourage their commanders, the nearby soldiers, taking their names, voiced continuous victory-cries The victory-shouts were becoming more and more sky-rending For an hour the furious antagonists hurled arrow-torrents at each other The steel mail on their bodies flattened the sharp points of arrows But warm blood flowed in a steady stream from their wounded arms They hadn't even the time to staunch their loss of blood The blood of these two was sweetly familial, but Karna was too agitated now even to be aware of the relationship

Seeing hundreds of Matsya, Panchala, Saindhava and Gandhara warriors drop like ripe fruit of the *audumbara*-tree, the soldiers of both armies held back their weapons They left the entire battlefield to the two opponents, and stood still as mute spectators, witnessing the doom-duel with wide-open eyes

The two heroes now prepared to attack each other with their life precious, divinely acquired weapons Even if the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, who had given them birth, had turned up at the scene of battle now, she could not have surmised that they were blood brothers The two opponents were now as opposite as the two poles of the earth Each saw only one goal in front of him—the lifeless form of his opponent Each thirsted for that end only Each was oblivious of himself, totally so

From a golden quiver Karna drew out a celestial snake-mouthed arrow the tip of which had been dipped in sandal-powder, unknown to Karna, this arrow had been charged with shakti by a Naga serpent Aiming straight at Arjuna's neck, he intoned a mantra and released the dreadful shaft Arjuna had no inkling at all that the arrow was speeding towards him with the swiftness of wind, targeted at his neck

I jerked the reins dexterously, all five horses suddenly swerved, then sat down As a result, the fearful arrow aimed at Arjuna's neck sped over the lowered chariot and, clanging against Arjuna's golden coronet, knocked it off his head It rolled away noisily on the battlefield The helmet under the coronet turned askew and fell inside the chariot Arjuna breathed a sigh of relief His dark-blue curly hair floated free I glanced at him and laughed

Untying his pure-white silk waist-band, Arjuna wrapped it around his forehead The summons of Fate was now becoming more and more urgent

Shalya bit his lips when he saw the back of our chariot facing him, and attempted to manoeuvre, but he was immobilised in a cage of arrows Nonetheless, he kept urging the horses by flicking his reins on their backs The horses dug in their hooves and tried to turn the chariot with all their strength, but but the chariot did not move so much as an inch It was not going to move at all now

For about half an hour the chariot remained embedded in the slush The bloody slush around its wheels thickened in the heat of the sun, and the earth seemed to grip the chariot hard The Sun did not want to witness any further humiliation of his son Did he intend to take him away to his Eternal Resting Place?

Fatigued Shalya advised Karna to throw away all the heavy weapons in the chariot—all except the arrows and quivers—and started flinging them out himself Foaming at the mouths, the chariot steeds struggled to find hoof-holds in the slippery bog, but the vehicle did not move even a jot The left wheel of the chariot was inextricably stuck, like a lost bull bogged in a marsh on Mahendra hill

I manoeuvred the Nandighosha in circular mandalas around Karna's chariot, even as he continued shooting arrows

"Raja of Anga, the chariot is not moving even an inch The left wheel is totally enveloped in the earth," Shalya shouted in fear

"Do not worry, king of Madra I will pull out the chariot-wheel "

Holding steady the quiver on his back and the swift-and-continuous shooting Vijaya Bow in his hand, he alighted from his chariot—descending like the sun in the west

A whirl of thoughts filled my mind He descending from the chariot

Son of a charioteer, Raja of Anga, Commander-in-Chief, world-conqueror, hero of charities, the invincible bowman Karna—or the son of Kunti the first Pandava?

He thrust his right hand under a spoke of the left wheel, gathered his entire strength to jerk the chariot free The rippling ligaments on his muscular arms bulged Drops of sweat appeared on his forehead He jerked, but the wheel refused to budge The spoke snapped in his hand

Seeing the bow still in Karna's grip, Arjuna kept shooting arrows which pierced his bare arms He sat on the ground He pushed his bow as far deep into the earth as it would go, and stood it firm and erect, and adopted the sit-and shoot posture

disintegrated the cloud-masses. The sun's rays shone once again on Kurukshetra. Arjuna's Wind-missiles flew away with the flags and pennants of the war-chariots as if they were playthings. Ecstatic, Arjuna raised his victory-cry and, intoning the mantra associated with the Lightning-missile, he hurled the weapon which sped towards Karna with countless sharp arrows. Noticing the various strange multi-shaped weapons rushing towards him, Karna, completely unfazed, countered with the Bhargava-weapon which he had obtained on Mahendra hill. The celestial, all-destroying weapons of both the missiles collided noisily, scattering on the ground in a shower of sparks.

Arjuna fired the all-consuming Brahma-missile. Karna blocked it with great skill; not only that, he succeeded in shredding with his infallible arrows the flag on our Nandighosha chariot. He was aiming his arrows at our wheels. They pierced our chariot. Both warriors used all manner of weapons at each other—the bow, the noose, the javelin, the *bhindipala*, the chakra, the three-pronged lance. Neither seemed to tire. The battle was inconclusive. The third part of the day ended and the sun began its decline in the west.

Even more fearful than the duels between Indra and Bali, Nahusha and Indra, and Jarasandha and Bhima, was the battle between Arjuna and Karna. A blood-curdling spectacle! A duel gaining in intensity every moment!

Over the entire battlefield spread a shroud of countless arrows—*nishitha*, *naracha*, *jihma*, *sanmataparva*, *kanka-punkha*, *bastika*, *rukmapunkha*, and *kshura*. Though Karna and Arjuna had no intention of killing them, countless warriors died as a result of the celestial barrage. Both armies could now be numbered in thousands only—such was the frightful massacre done by both. Neither retreated. Neither tired, even for an instant. This battle of a single day was even more gory than the battles of the past sixteen days.

Finally, Karna hurled at Arjuna the Atharvan-missile which he had obtained from Parashurama on Mahendra hill after great hardship. To evade that weapon, I made the horses turn swiftly full-circle, as a result of which the Nandighosha chariot slipped about twenty cubits backwards and landed in the bog. Which was the reason I had smeared grease on the chariot-wheels. The Atharvan-missile missed its target.

us. Seeing Arjuna preparing to aim at him, he waved his left hand furiously and shouted, "Arjuna, wait! I am unarmed. I am standing on the ground. It is *against the dharma* of a chariot-warrior to attack an unarmed opponent on the ground. You are a hero, a Kshatriya." He was surely trying to concentrate his mental energies to recall the *mantra of the* Brahma-missile which he had obtained on Mahendra hill. But he was unable to do so.

I knew that he was totally *unafraid of dying. He had desired* with all his heart to obtain the Brahma-missile and, after obtaining it, all he looked forward to was death. But even that was now not in his fate. This was hardly fair... and in any case it was not possible.

His touching appeal put Arjuna in a dilemma. Disturbed, he allowed the bow in his hands to droop. There was no doubt of it, he was in two minds. His lips again became dry.

It was futile now to grant Karna even one more second of life... because... no one after this would ever know the facts of his life, the legitimacy of his birth. Therefore, in order to make Arjuna's mind firm, I had again to instil in Arjuna the importance of practical wisdom. I had to take the very principles of the warrior's dharma that Karna was stressing and, applying them to Karna by reminding Arjuna of past incidents, I had to steel Arjuna's mind. I had to transform vacillating and perplexed Arjuna into a mountain as firm as Sumeru. *A veritable Yamuna of language began flowing* from my lips like a fierce resistless flood.

"Dharma! What do you know at all of dharma, son of Radha? Son of a charioteer, what happened to your sublime dharma when, in the ancient assembly hall of the Kauravas, you described Draupadi as a prostitute? Where did your dharma disappear when you saw Kunti-devi leave barefoot in forest-exile with her five Pandava sons? Why didn't your dharma protest when you heard that the Pandavas had been burnt to ashes in the lacquer house? And, son of a charioteer, why didn't you recall this same dharma when the six of you surrounded and butchered the sixteen-year old boy Abhimanyu? Take aim, *Arjuna!" I pointed my* forefinger straight at Karna's throat.

Even then he smiled. He joined both palms. Not in supplication before anyone; but simply to offer me reverence. I... only I could understand this. His last obeisance on the field of battle—flowing from his silent eyes.

With his left hand he removed the arrows from his quiver and with one hand nocked them on his Vijaya bow. Holding the bowstring firmly between his clenched teeth, he pulled it back with all his strength and shot the arrows accurately at Arjuna. With his right hand he tried to free the wheel with all his might. Two or three more spokes broke apart but the wheel remained stuck, not moving an inch. With one hand he fixed an arrow that rendered Arjuna unconscious. Seeing this, he placed his Vijaya bow on the ground and, thrusting both hands in the slush, he tried with full force to pull out the wheel.

This was the only time since that morning that the bow was not in his hands. Just for a brief moment. A momentous moment. And if this moment passed, then—then...

I placed a reed tube filled with herbal medicines near Arjuna's nose. In a flash he revived and stood up.

Seeing Karna unarmed, Arjuna also laid aside his Gandiva bow, since a defenceless opponent could not be attacked.

In the courtyard of my mind raced thoughts, like herds of cows brushing against each other's flanks in the pasturage of Gokula. I kept flicking the reins of the five Nandighosha steeds incessantly on their backs. No plan suggested itself to my mind. A momentous moment, otherwise... that sky-vast hero would free the wheel and attack us again.

I held five reins, but only one whip. One—or five? Reins or the whip? The whip or the reins? Five, or one? Ah, nothing made sense! And then, suddenly, a shining thought came to me. An eminently practical idea. Eminently incontestable.

Reins stop horses, whips make them gallop. Instantly I thrust the whip in my right hand in its tiger-skin case attached to the chariot, and flicked the reins. Pointing the forefinger of my right hand at volcano-like Karna who was struggling to release his chariot wheel, I said to Arjuna, "Arjuna, select an *anjalika* half-moon arrow."

"But...he's defenceless. He's standing on the ground, and I am inside a chariot," Arjuna demurred.

"This is an order, Arjuna." My voice was sharp and harsh. I frowned.

Obedient Arjuna swiftly pulled out an *anjalika* arrow from his quiver. He tested the tautness of the bowstring by twanging it once. Hearing that faint twang, Karna instantly turned to look at

had gifted away. His blue eyes opened fully. Neither of the two warriors spoke a word. The tears of Ashvatthaman mixed with Karna's tears. I could clearly see some of the rain-drops on the banks of far-away Drishadvati gleaming like dew-drops—remnants of the rain that was created by his employment of the Varuna-missile. Shimmering drops of dew...drops that would dissipate in the earth the instant a wind began blowing.

Yudhishthira, Arjuna, the three other Pandavas, and other warriors had surrounded him so thickly that not even an ant could slip through.

His son Chitrasena sat beside with tear-filled eyes. All were benumbed. His eyes, briefly opening and closing, surveyed them all, seeking perhaps to spot Duryodhana. He could not see Duryodhana anywhere near.

The moment he noticed me, even in that terrible state, a faint smile appeared on his face. With an intense effort, he opened his eyes fully. Slowly taking his heavy-feeling hands to his head, he removed the crown and shakily placed it at my feet.

I had myself made Ashvatthaman place that crown on Karna's head when I had seen him sitting crownless in the pavilion of the Rajasuya Yajna. And now he, in the same silent way, had offered the crown at my feet—with boundless bhakti.

I stooped and picked up the crown at my feet. My eyes brimmed with tears for the first time. Now he had no rights to that crown. With my yellow garment, I dusted the crown. Seeing this, the Pandavas and all the other warriors were wonder-struck. What did they know? How could they ever know?

Peace descended on all quarters. Holding back his tears, Chitrasena poured holy water from the sacred rivers in Karna's mouth. Holding his breath, he swallowed the water through his half-sliced throat in terrible pain. Standing deathly still, all looked at him. The devotee who offered *arghya* in the waters of the Ganga was now himself drinking the holy water of the Ganga.

13

"*Arre*, is there any hero of charities left in this world today?" It was a shaky, elderly voice, piercing the total stillness of the area. All turned their faces in extreme surprise.

The *anjalika* shaft sped out of Arjuna's twanging bow and, slicing through the coat of mail that covered Karna's neck, embedded itself with a swish near his throat, half-piercing it That mighty chariot-hero slumped in the slush beside the wheel The Vijaya Bow fell at a far distance In the confusion of pulling out the stuck wheel, his shawl had been splattered with filth The shredded rope of the left wheel snapped as he tugged at it in pathetic agony The chariot-wheel broke off from the hub "Karna is wounded! Karna has fallen!" As soon as the news reached their ears, the soldiers of both armies laid down their weapons The news was unbelievable Each soldier asked his fellow-soldier, "What's happened? What is going on?"

Only I knew what anguish I passed through when I addressed him at the end as "Son of a charioteer", in order to implement a very difficult decision I dropped the reins All the walls of principles created for the orderly functioning of society crashed

Blindly, I jumped off my chariot and ran towards his mangled body, hands uplifted, shouting, "Son of Radha!" Ashwatthaman, who loved him more than life itself, was already beside him Hearing the news of his fall, Duryodhana fainted He ordered the cessation of the battle, and fell down in his chariot, like a crumbling embankment

Ashvatthaman and five massive-bodied warriors took the wounded body of their commander and placed it on dry ground near a tent Blood gushed from his neck and daubed his armour

His half-closed blue eyes stared fixedly at the blue sky The instant Ashvatthaman brought his face near, Karna, with great effort, opened his eyes "Son of my guru " Gazing at the head band of Ashvatthaman, he spoke haltingly His lips fluttered

The fact that Ashvatthaman, forgetting everything, had rushed to his side, made Karna so happy that no words came to his lips Ashvatthaman read his mind Quickly untying the knot of the head-band under his chin, he flung the cloth on the dusty ground On his head was a red flesh-gem he was born with—similar to Karna's flesh-ear-rings With the exception of these two, none other possessed such divine birth-gifts.

Suddenly lifting the right hand of the dying hero, Ashvatthaman tearfully placed it on his flesh gem As soon as the celestial gem touched him, he remembered his own flesh-ear-rings, which he

his fists helplessly. What could he possibly give the old man? It was an insoluble problem. The coat-of-mail on his chest started heaving rapidly.

What should he now do? His reputation as the hero of charities was in peril. Excepting for coats-of-mail and weapons, no warrior nearby possessed so much as a cracked bead. There were golden crowns left, but they were on the heads of the Pandavas.

His feet and hands suddenly stopped flailing. Something struck him, and he opened his half-closed eyes. They blazed with an unbelievable radiance.

"C-h-i-t-r-a-s-e-n-a! S-t-o-n-e!" He ordered Chitrasena, who rose and brought a stone from far. Seeing Chitrasena in front of him, his blue eyes gleamed with an indescribable, ineffable dazzle.

Concentrating all his shakti, he spoke rapidly, "Chitrasena... that stone... break my gold teeth... give to... old man ..." The strain made him pause. The agony produced by the arrow still embedded in his throat made him close his eyes tightly.

Chitrasena stood there, trembling violently. He dearly loved his father. Instead of offering flowers at the feet of his dying father, he was expected to break his father's teeth with a stone—how could he possibly do that? A strapping young man of twentyfive, trembling incontrollably. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Chitrasena!" Karna's tone was harsh—like the clang of an arrow striking a steel coat-of-mail.

"You are... ordered... by the Kaurava... Commander... Chitr-s-e-n-a!" His voice had the ring of authority. No soldier could refuse to obey his command. The soldiers standing near could hardly believe their ears.

Their tear-filled eyes turned to Chitrasena. He was still trembling. The warrior who had fought like a lion all day on the field was shaking like a rabbit, rooted to one spot like a man bereft of his senses. Drops of sweat dripped from his brow on the stone he held in his hand.

"Chitra-s-e-n-a!" Karna's lips quivered. His eyes spewed fire. He gazed angrily at his son—as a commander gazes at a disobedient soldier.

Chitrasena sprang forward, as if struck by lightning. No matter what, he was after all the seed of Karna. Seeing Chitrasena approaching, Karna's eyes gleamed with joy. The next moment he

An elderly Brahmin had discovered his son's corpse on the battlefield But he was so alone and poor that he did not have enough money even to perform the last samskaras Wailing piteously, he had traversed the entire battlefield, with open wrinkled hands, begging for anything he could get from any living or wounded soldiers It seemed that all humaneness had been consumed in the conflagration of war no soldier listened to his supplications Noticing a crowd, he had come hopefully to where we were gathered Because he had no idea who lay dying, he was shouting from the edge of the crowd

"*Arre*, is there any hero of charities left in this world today?" His neck was trembling The staff in his hand was shaking The instant his feeble, quavering words reached the semi-conscious ears of Karna, Karna's sensitive soul responded with deep feeling His entire body throbbed in an extraordinary manner He overcame even the disability of his wounded neck Looking at Chitrasena, he said with amazing clarity, "Ch-i t-ra-a-s-e-n-a—s-u-p-p-l-i-c-a n-t "

Immediately Chitrasena stood up, rushed to the Brahmin on the edge of the crowd and, holding his hand, guided him to Karna The old man's grey-and-white hair was dishevelled His eyes were set deep in his wrinkled face His neck wobbled

"Tell me, Brah-m-i-n, boon de-s-i-r-e " The fatally wounded commander's lips quivered when he saw the old man with outstretched hands

Seeing the blood spurting from the mighty hero's neck, the Brahmin forgot his own son's death, and said humbly, "Nothing, Raja of Anga, nothing " That old man had been granted many boons earlier by Karna What could he possibly ask now from dying, forlorn Karna?

It was this moment, this very moment which I could have used to disclose the identity of the first Pandava to the other Pandavas standing around This was the moment when I could have highlighted worldly values to the Pandavas and divine values to Karna

I stepped forward and whispered in his ear, ' That old man is so poor that he does not have the wherewithal even to perform the last samskaras of his dead son That is why he is seeking a hero of charities '

"H e r-o of c h a r i t i e-s!" He mumbled inaudibly He quickly closed his eyes, began thrashing his arms and legs, and clenching

The blood on his teeth was washed clean by his tears The teeth gleamed brightly in the sun's rays Seeing this, his eyes glowed with joy and contentment

He picked one flower from the crushed tuberose wristlet and placed it on top of the teeth Lifting the gift-offering to his broad forehead, he smiled and raised his hand to gift the teeth to the supplicant That gift thus became perfectly in accordance with prescribed ritual

Many in this world have given gifts But but only the first born Pandava knew how to give, while at the very door of death a gift so heart shaking, so total so incomparable The eldest son of Kunti The son of Surya

From countless throats came the acclamation 'Blessed Karna! Blessed Karna!"

Trembling, the old Brahmin stepped forward Now there was no choice but to accept the gift With shaking hands he received the gift Grateful tears from his old eyes fell on the two gold teeth and the tuberose Karna tried to bow his head in order to pay homage to the elderly supplicant But the arrow in his throat prevented his doing so The old man could not contain himself, and shouted, "Hero of charities Karna! Blessed is the lady who gave you birth! And blessed is the earth that nourished your large-hearted, large-framed body! Hero of charities Karna, there has not been, nor will there ever be, such a dedicated donor in the whole of Aryavarta " His words were charged with pain

Neck shaking and eyes brimming with tears, the old man, carrying his unparalleled gift, made his way to where his son's corpse lay

Seeing him leave satisfied, that hero of charities, though at death's door, smiled faintly What was the meaning of that smile? Not all would be able to fathom it

The bow in Arjuna's hand and the mace on Bhima's shoulder started shaking Though they witnessed this incredible spectacle of physical endurance, it never occurred to them that Karna could not be the son of a charioteer

He was the son of Surya The son of Kunti The eldest brother, as excellent as the others But they were not aware of this

His wandering eyes were still searching for someone For Duryodhana

closed his eyes tightly, and clenched his fists, anticipating the unbearable agony that would suffuse his being when the tooth was broken—an agony exceeding the agony in his throat The skin around his half-closed eyes twitched He opened wide his serene mouth which so often chanted purifying mantras to the Sun-God—a mouth like a fully-blossomed sunflower His teeth, as symmetrically arranged as sunflower pistils, shone Two of them were made of gold, and they gleamed a yellow sparkle

Suppressing the intense emotion which rose in him, Chitrasena lifted the stone Many closed their eyes Something that had never happened on any battlefield was being enacted on Kurukshetra today

"Thud! Thud!" Two sounds were absorbed in the field of Kurukshetra Flinging away the stone, and thinking *My father would be upset by my uncontrollable sobbing*, Chitrasena sped like an arrow through the ring of warriors into the distance, as if drained of all energy

The teeth of the hero of charity broke and fell in his mouth The blood from his gums splashed and mingled with the blood from his wounded throat, and spilled drop by drop on the earth Tears flowed from the eyes of the assembled soldiers With great anguish he held the broken teeth in his hand His eyes radiated a strange glow A hollow began deepening in his mouth

Trembling, he said brokenly, "Brahmin, this gift this blood-smeared defiled gift how can I place it in your pure hands?" All who stood there horripilated in awe No one except I knew about his philosophy of life If by any chance anyone got to know, he would not have believed it

Once again he felt helpless, because he could think of no way to remove the bloodstains from the teeth From his eyes flowed an incessant stream of tears With tear-filled eyes he gazed briefly at his father who was setting in the sky above Amina hill Fixedly Unblinkingly

The next instant, a strange, profound, subtle flash of insight made him self-aware Throughout his life, he had dealt with everything with this unexplainable flash of insight

He held the teeth in his hands, allowing his tears to wash them He kept staring fixedly at the sun to let the tears flow continuously from his eyes Impossible even to imagine what fearful confusion must have gripped his mind at that time Even I lacked the imagination to do so

He opened his drooping eyes with great effort. I could see tears in his eyes. Tears of what? Of sorrow? Of repentance? Ah, of thankfulness! Of gratitude! I, I myself, called him "Son of Kunti"—so the tears were perhaps thankfulness for being so recognised. He also replied feebly, "Lord of Dvarika... my last wish... is... is... that you... perform... my last samskaras... on... a plot... of barren land... Barren land!" His words trailed into inaudibility.

"Barren land! Meaning?" I could not follow what exactly he meant, so I asked.

"Yes, barren... That land... where... not even... a grass blade... grows... nor will ever grow... May my sorrows... never again take birth... in my form... in this mortal world... That is why... I want... my five elements... to merge... in this... barren land..."

His words were becoming almost inaudible. I too was astounded by the strange last wish of his. He was now babbling indistinctly. Wondering if he had still something to say, I took my ears close to his mouth. I listened intently. With singleminded concentration.

His words were unclear and incoherent. "Li... Di... Mata... Mata... na... na..."

No one could tell what he meant. Did he say "Vrishali" or "Draupadi"? Did he say "Kunti-Mata" or "Radha-Mata"? Did he say "Shon" or "Arjuna"? It was impossible to tell.

Then even the indistinct mumbling ceased. The blue pupils which were fixed on the sun stopped moving. I could tell, however, what he was saying, by observing the movements of his lips. They were the last words of the *arghya*-performing son of the Sun-God. The lip movements indicated that he was chanting the Gayatri mantra.

"Om *bhurbhuvah svaha, tatsavitur varenyam...* " And then suddenly, even the lip movements ended. All held their breaths. His breathing stopped completely. The coat-of-mail stopped heaving. A resplendent, all-bewildering, dazzling ray of light shot out instantaneously from the lotus of his heart and sped swiftly to the red orb of the sun moving slowly in the western horizon over the Amina Hill. The next moment the ray of light was absorbed in the Golden Womb of the Sun. The dazzling ray astounded all who stood there.

That mighty death-conqueror had finally achieved his Supreme Nirvana.

The instant he recovered consciousness, Duryodhana ran out, and sliced a path through the gathered soldiers even as a crocodile slices through water "Anga-Ra-a a-j-a!" he screamed as soon as he saw Karna For the first time in his life tears welled up in his eyes Eighty of his brothers had perished on the field, but he had not felt such grief even for them

Karna called Duryodhana to his side with his eyes He was now preparing to make the ultimate gift The last, magnificent gift The gift of his thoughts and ideas

"King when I die see that you order an end to the war " Seeing his lips quavering, all were stupefied Truly, there was an endless depth in this man

"No o-o-o! Raja of Anga! My friend! A mighty, illustrious hero like you gives his life for me, and I—I make peace because I am afraid to die!—This is too shameful for me If death can take Grandsire Bhishma, and Guru Drona, and you am I in any way different? No one is immortal The war will not end It will go on, it will go on because of you!" Duryodhana cast a flaming glance in my and Arjuna's direction And the next instant he was down on his knees and, taking Karna's massive arm in his hands, that redoubtable Kaurava leader broke into sobs even more pathetic than those of Chitrasena With his other arm Karna patted Duryodhana in an attempt to console him Now Karna had reached a point where he wanted to renounce every little bit of the world The loss of blood from his neck and his gums had begun seriously enfeebling him Ashvatthaman stepped forward and cradled his head lovingly in his lap The continuous blood-loss made him feel drowsy, his eyes heavy

I was wondering when Duryodhana would ask him his last wish But his grief had made him forget all about it Duryodhana's life was now like a chariot wheel without a hub Aimless

The hero of charities lay gasping His half-closed eyes began setting like the sun They merged with the sun His handsome body was slowly becoming still The coat of-mail on his massive trunk-like body moved in rhythm to his steadily declining breathing

It was my duty now to ask him his last wish Only *my* duty

I stepped forward I placed my mouth next to his sliced ears, and said softly, "Son of Kunti, your last wish "

"Krishna... *Arre*, his last darshan..." The words choked in her sobbing throat. She could not even lift her face cupped in her hands.

"Brave mother, Queen Mother, control your grief. One has died; don't lose the five you still have. At midnight I will take you for his darshan. At least, let the secret remain for the time being a secret."

She wiped her eyes.

When that suffering heroic mother, who had passed through so many tragedies in so many forms, reached the corpse of Karna at midnight, she trembled like a red *indrayana* creeper in a buffeting storm. Her feet seemed to be rooted to the earth. I took her hand and pulled her to her dead son by the Sun-God. She did not have the courage to remove her shielding hands from her face.

I removed Ashvatthaman's covering cloth from Karna's face. Karna looked peaceful as if sleeping. His golden corpse gleamed even in the hazy light of the torches.

With the greatest of courageous effort she removed her hands from her face, and lifted her head; and the next moment she screamed.

"My son! My darling son!" She buckled and was about to fall. I steadied her. Who else was there now left except I to look after her?

15

The eighteenth day of battle ended. Bhima smashed Duryodhana's thigh, keeping his vow. The Pandavas' victory was undisputed. The long shadows of the evening of the nineteenth day slanted here and there on the battlefield. The field was chockful of the departed spirits of the slain. There wasn't four fingers of space on Amina hill without corpses. A white horse could be seen in the far distance, but sitting.

Curious, I walked towards the horse. I had been searching for Karna's corpse for a long time. As I reached the horse, I was surprised, shocked. My doubt was confirmed. It was Karna's horse, Vayujit, sitting beside the corpse of his master, fanning his master's face with his tail. It was too much for me. With tear-filled eyes I gazed at the mute beast. Even the littlest satisfaction of the Pandavas' victory faded. All that remained was astonishment, again and again, at the ways of nature.

14

The instant Karna died, the setting Sun-God atop the Amina hill flared with a brief sudden splendour and, without the least delay, vanished beyond the horizon. The entire western region blurred. Gusts of wind edged shimmering dewdrops to the ground where they melted into nothingness. The four directions darkened. The earth became forlorn.

Ashvatthaman quickly stepped forward and smelt Karna's noble head. Duryodhana lifted Karna's hand and placed it on his own head. Chitrasena fell at Karna's clean, beautifully shaped feet.

Karna's shining atman returned to and mingled with the same resplendent eternal abode from where it came. Yet his body glowed with such intensity that it seemed to be alive. The crown that some time ago Karna had offered at my feet, I gently placed again on his curly golden hair.

The third commander of the Kauravas lay in eternal repose.

Ashvatthaman removed the *anjalika* arrow embedded in Karna's throat, and covered Karna's round Sun-like face with the white cloth which was permanently wrapped round his head.

Accompanied by the Pandavas, I walked towards the tent. The atmosphere was fearful, even gruesome. All were silent. In the far distance, a partridge kept up a shrieking ill-omened wail. Also far away, one could see a massive white horse, fatigued, sitting in the bog. A horse, alive, and sitting! I was surprised. I entered the tent of Arjuna with the Pandavas. I was quiet. Seeing the Queen Mother at the entrance, my face paled even more. Arjuna thought that she had heard of Karna's defeat and death and so had come running joyfully to the tent.

"Mother, your blessings." He stepped forward, bowing his head at her feet, and arrogantly asked for her blessings.

There was not enough light for him to notice that the end of the upper garment covered her face. Arjuna wasn't sensitive enough—and even if he did notice it now, what good was it?

Placing my hand on the Queen Mother's trembling back, I guided her into the inner room of the tent, and so averted a scene.

She, I, and the Pandavas were together only for a moment—and then the Pandavas went out to change their war-vesture. Only Kunti Devi and I remained in the tent, and then the disciplined restraint of that great lady shattered and she burst into sobs.

She was a sati who had entered the flames for the sake of an eternal union with her husband—what possible attachment could she have had? Puzzled, I opened the knot. A shard. A shard of a broken pot. I was bewildered.

I raised my hand to throw the shard into the flames. But I lowered my hand, because I wanted to retain the shard as a memory of Karna's last rites and Vrishali's life-dedication. I tied the shard in the end of my yellow robe.

With my whip on my shoulder, and holding Vayujit by his throat-lash, I turned back, and started descending the slope. The Pandavas, searching for me, had seen the pyre's flames and were running up the hill. I could see them clearly. Five torches were flickering; they were the torches of the Pandavas.

But they were late; far too late.

Shifting the whip from my right to my left hand, I stepped forward The instant I lovingly patted the white horse, his body throbbed Whatever little experience I had as a charioteer had found its fulfilment I clucked "Tch-Tch", that high-pedigreed creature understood, and with all his strength dug his hooves in the earth and stood up I lifted his master's golden body and placed it on the horse's massive back His master's last ride had to be careful and comfortable, so Vayujit walked slowly We had to cross the Amina hill

On the way I picked up the burning torch from the tent of Acharya Kripa

I and Vayujit climbed the hill Exactly then the indistinct orb of the Sun Deity set in the horizon

On this peak of the hill the soil was black and strewn with rocks I had kept everything ready for the cremation A funeral pyre of sandalwood had been constructed on that barren stretch

I lifted dear Karna from Vayujit's glossy back and placed him on the pyre Torch in hand, I tried quickly to get a glimpse of his face With trembling hands I lit the pyre Swiftly, red and yellow tongues of flame leapt up to the sky Born of the essence of fire itself, that son of ether space lived through the fire of the earth, and in the end was intermingling with fire Right then Vayujit neighed and frisked and jumped I flung the torch into the pyre and approached Vayujit He too needed looking after I clucked to him, and stroked his mane His presence was pleasing to me also My mind was slowly becoming numb I gazed with unseeing eyes at the pyre, while I kept stroking his mane

Suddenly that white horse trembled and, ears cocked, turned his neck in the direction from where we had come A lady dressed in pure white was coming slowly towards us I shuddered It was Vrishali

Steady, unblinking eyes, wet dress clinging to her body she approached, step by slow step Like a daughter of the sky Her palms were joined Gazing neither left nor right, she went straight to the pyre, like a white stone statue walking She was not even aware that her shawl had slipped from her shoulder She passed by me, and stepped suddenly into the pyre I was dumbfounded

When the truth sank in, I silently felt for Vrishali With the whip handle I raised her upper garment to deposit it in the pyre Noticing a knot in the *anchal*, I withdrew the garment instead of consigning it to the flames

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Indian Creative Writing in English

all the way from the Nishadha kingdom The rust-coloured triangular pennant of the Kauravas fluttered atop the platform, as if challenging the sky Guru Drona would stand on this platform, as judge of the competition, and place a blue-lotus-threaded-on-gold-string garland around the neck of the victor, who would be seated in a canopy on a decorated elephant and taken out in a procession by the citizens The Queen Mother would place a saffron tilak on his forehead and affectionately offer *arati* before him As the finest hero of Hastinapura he would be glorified and respected all over Aryavarta

Around each of the arenas were circular seating arrangements for spectators Near the eastern end were luxurious elevated seats for members of the royal family, in the centre was the spot where Grandsire Bhishma would ensconce himself On his right was Vidura's seat, on his left Maharaja Dhritarashtra's On the left of these seats a grand pavilion had been put up which glittered with colourful curtains, it was reserved for the royal ladies

Leaving their daily chores, the citizens thronged to see the arena, and stood there agape at the spectacle, murmuring among themselves, "Never in the history of the Kuru dynasty have we heard of such a magnificent arena being erected Who is going to be the supreme hero? Bhima, Arjuna, Duryodhana, or Duhshasana?"

We were about to return, because we had arrived after covering a two hundred mile distance from Champanagari, when Ashvatthaman said, 'Karna, all the student-warriors have done something or other to beautify this games arena What have you two done?

"You tell us, what should we do?" Being a youth from the ashram, Ashvatthaman was in charge of organising the diverse activities He was not going to let me off easily

He said this because there was apparently no work left for us to do One of the workers, with a silk cloth tucked under his arm, was about to enter from the main gate Ashvatthaman called out to him "You there! What's that under your arm? Bring it here Let's get these two to do some work "

Ashvatthaman pulled the bundle from the boy, and straightened it, holding the two corners It was the royal insignia of the Kauravas the figure of the Sun God, embroidered with gold thread on expensive silk My eyes glowed with joy Placing the royal insignia in my hands, Ashvatthaman said, "Karna, go and unfurl this on the wooden staff in the central marble platform "

I approached the platform I fixed the insignia to face the east. Shon placed a flower-garland on the glorious insignia.

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And so the appointed Vasanta Purnima day arrived All Hastinapura was a glut of invited guests The day of screening the chaff from the wheat Each competitor, before entering the arena, was expected to obtain the blessings of his guru But but what was I to do? The sky that day was suddenly overcast with dark clouds since dawn I felt deeply frustrated At crack of dawn, at the auspicious hour of Brahma-*muhurta*, I rose and waited, with breath indrawn, for a brief darshan of my celestial guru on the waters of the Ganga But the merciless band of dense wicked clouds stood between him and me The fact was—as I used to tell Shon in our boyhood days—that if I happened to be Garuda, I would have risen high up in the sky in a flash on my strong wings and ripped open the heartless clouds with my sharp-nailed talons Through the rent I could have had a glimpse of at least one hand of my guru And he would have lovingly caressed my back with it But this was not to be There are times when a man is even more helpless than a bird or a beast

Three-fourths of the morning passed, and still no change in the sky Shon stood on the sands of the Ganga, waiting for me I was in the waters He was not to call out to me, even by mistake Even if I remained in the water all day, he would follow suit, on the bank I couldn't stay in the water too long I closed my eyes, helplessly In spite of my efforts, no bright light appeared, as it used to earlier Why? Could it be an ill omen? *Chhee!* The mind gets all crazy at times, thinking of undesirable and evil possibilities As in the past, I folded my palms, and silently prayed "Deva, why are you so angry with me, today of all days? Grant me your blessing today You will see today the citizens honouring me as the supreme hero " I offered him *anjali* and turned There was a strange uneasiness in my heart Shon was waiting for me at the edge He was getting restless to go to the arena But but the moment he saw me, wrinkles creased his forehead I was taken aback I asked him, "What's the matter, Shon? Why the frown?" He kept silent But I couldn't bear his silence I grasped both his shoulders, shook him, and shouted "Shon, *arre*, why are you quiet?" Not saying a word, he gazed at my

ears with wide, rolling eyes The next instant his eyes lost their sparkle I couldn't endure his staring at me in this puzzling manner I cupped his face in my hands and, gazing deeply into his eyes, I asked worriedly, "Shon, are you going to ignore this little request of your brother? Tell me, Shon, what is this life-killing secret that you will hide even from me?"

He was perturbed Clasping, with his trembling hands, my hands on his cheeks, he said, "Bhaiya, don't go to the arena today Your guru hasn't granted you darshan Let's go back "

"You're crazy Does my guru give me darshan every day? Who knows where he goes and hides himself for four whole months in the monsoon?"

"But it isn't monsoon time now We're in spring There's no reason for him not to show his face today "

"I don't know about that I have my guru's blessings today—that's all I know Come " I took his hand and pushed him ahead

"No, bhaiya, I'm not going to let you go " There was fear in his voice

"Why? Don't you know the Hero of Hastinapura is being chosen today? Today of all days I have to be there "

"No, no, not today " He held my hands tightly His grip trembled

"Shon, don't be childish Learn to change with the times Remember, you are Karna's brother " This was the first time ever I had pulled him up so strongly

He eased his face out of my cupping hands, moved four steps back, and said with bowed head, "I am your brother I have never denied this, nor will I ever deny it That is why my mind keeps telling me to tell you not to go to the arena today Because because your flesh-ear-rings have lost their radiance today They're ringed by dark circles "

His piercing words entered my ears like molten glass, and saddened me The countless ants of his doubt nibbled from all sides at my wounded serpent-mind *Why are my flesh ear-rings darkened today? Why is the sky overcast today? What great doom is this an omen of? Which poison-seed is being planted today? What is going to happen to Karna? Why was I given these flesh ear rings? What is their role? Why am I being so stubborn anyway?* Innumerable firefly questions flickered in front of my eyes Finally a voice from within

spoke, and counselled patience I made up my mind that Shon was right, but what harm was there in proceeding towards the arena? Wearily I said to him, "Very well, Shon I won't compete today But on one condition I'll stand outside the arena, near the main gate. I'll enter the arena only when my guru grants me darshan "

Shon, delighted, nodded approval We squelched our way across the sand

All the roads of the capital were silent and deserted Children as well as elders had all gone to the arena Had a stranger entered the city at that time, he would never have believed, even if told, that this was Hastinapura, the capital of the Kauravas, because there wasn't even one person in the city On account of the cloud-covered sky, Hastinapura looked like a coop-imprisoned rooster just before he is sacrificed

We approached the arena, and heard the clapping and shouts of the citizens The noise was enough to send warm blood currents rushing through my body—but to no avail My word to Shon forced me to stand outside the arena We neared the arena entrance The competition had started quite some time ago In some combat or other a competitor had apparently excelled, and continuous acclamation could be heard My feat-eager ambition prowled like a caged tiger, clawing at my flesh-rods on all sides in an attempt to break through It agonised like a tethered calf unable to reach its mother With great effort I controlled myself and said to Shon, "You go in I'll wait here " He stopped dead He probably thought I would sneak in after him Placing my hand on his shoulder, I said, ' Shon, trust me I'm not going in Karna has given his word Go " Gazing at my flesh-ear-rings, he went inside

Emerging from the hive of my mind, countless red bee-thoughts started dancing here and there If my flesh-ear-rings were the root cause of my problem, then why not tear them out and throw them in the dust, and walk into the arena with ripped ears—but this was not possible because no matter how much you wanted to cut your ears it couldn't be done *Why was I given these flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour? What use are they? Why am I being so stubborn anyway?* In the hole of my mind many serpent-thoughts began wriggling I could see nothing of the arena I could hear only the vague conversations of the few spectators near the main entrance, and only in snatches Then suddenly there was a huge uproar My mind rose like milk bubbling to a boil I listened with overpowering curiosity Bits and pieces of words filled my ears

"Duhshasana has been humbled by Bhima! Bhima lifted him as high as his head, slammed him on the ground and sat on his chest He's pummelling him with all his strength "

My shoulder muscles swelled I could hear my heart thumping My swiftly-racing blood said to me *Karna, get up, go in Test your manhood in the competition Today is your chance*

Concentrating all my life-force in my pupils, I gazed up at the sky The thick heartless mass of clouds had not cleared I chafed like a helpless broken-winged bird I paced miserably in circles near the main gate In agony my mind cried out *Surya deva,* one darshan, *please Today is a day when every youth of Hastinapura wants to win even at the cost of his life Be gracious, just this once, cast your hundreds of eyes once on your favourite pupil Just once*

Again the resounding clapping My ears pricked up

"*Wah! Wah!* Nakula is so agile! He's placed a foot each on two horses at the same time and is riding them at the same speed Excellent! May the sons of Pandu be blessed !"

My mind ranswifter than the horses A dust of thoughts rose from my mind's hooves I was still pacing up and down near the entrance For a moment I thought *What promise, what vow?* I wanted to go in that very instant, but a voice kept saying to me *A word's given to be kept, Karna. A person who breaks his word is nothing but an animal* I moved back from the threshold

Still louder acclamation and shrill voices And after that, confused proclamations

'*Wah! Wah!* Bhima! How easily you've bested unbeaten Duryodhana in the mace duel How tremendous your blows are! It's a feast for the eyes Be blessed, O son of Vayu!"

My mind circled like a mace-fighter Helplessly I knotted my shawl tightly around my wrist Each pore of my body seemed to be boiling I looked at the sky The clouds seemed to be stirring, but nothing more For an instant I wanted to run with all speed to the Ganga and dip my inflamed body in its cool waters I untied the shawl at my wrist, placed it on my shoulder, and made my way to the Ganga

"Wait, bhaiya," Shon called from behind

I looked back and saw him standing at the threshold of the entrance, signalling me to stop I turned My neck was tired from repeated gazing at the sky

An endless flow of clapping, and more clapping Like a horse race Like rain falling in torrents

"Bhaiya, Arjuna has entered the arena."

Arjuna! Arjuna! Arjuna! Why is he so honoured? What great expoloits will he demonstrate?

Word-arrows pierced my ears from all sides Every second the cacophony in the arena grew Announcements came like showers of word-flowers

"Look, there! Arjuna is leaping from horseback to elephant-back and elephant to horseback to show his skill "

"He's brandishing two swords in both hands against the strong adversary facing him In a flash he has flicked the swords far out of his opponent's hands His opponent is shuffling out of the arena with bowed head There is no swordfighter to equal Arjuna "

"Look, there! Arjuna has reached the discus arena How gracefully he twirls the chakra, as if it is a *thali* Off and on he whirls it playfully up in the air, and then receives and balances it on the tip of an arrow "

"He's entering the wrestling arena now! Look at that perfect physique of his—chest as grand as the massive door of the arena Look at his arms and calves, rippling like the wild gourd colocynth! His blue complexion glows so vividly against the red earth of the arena *Arre wah!* And now he has flattened his opponent Durmukha on the earth-bed!"

"This Arjuna, how quickly he switches arenas and how adroitly he displays his varied feats—it's impossible to keep track of him Single Arjuna or thirteen Arjunas? There he goes now, dressed in bowman's outfit, to the archery arena, like Vishnu himself Blessed be Arjuna! Blessed be the son of Pandu! Search the whole of Aryavarta and you won't find Arjuna's equal in archery He'll be declared the supreme hero of Hastinapura today "

Acclamation Continuous clapping Clapping that shamed even monsoon downpours in intensity Shouts Noise Confusion Arjuna! Arjuna! Boiling blood! Archer! Overcast sky! Lustreless, dark flesh-ear-rings! Supreme hero! Garland of blue lotuses! Victory procession! Queen Mother !

"Shon, what's happening to me? Let me go to the Ganga, or I'll be burnt to ashes!" Lifting my ear-rings and desperately pressing my palms against my ears, I raised my head and screamed My body was all aflame Wearily I placed my burning head on Shon's shoulder Fiery streams of sweat coursed down my body, which scorched Shon's shoulder Word-sparks had set my flesh on fire Chaos within Despairing hot tears trickled down my cheeks

"Look, there! Arjuna shooting countless arrows at countless targets."

"He's piercing tossed-up fruits in mid-air, and slicing them in twos, fours, eights, and countless fragments No fruit falls to the ground unchopped "

"And there he is, shooting a snake-arrow, that zig-zags across obstacles and drives unerringly to its target "

"Releasing a swarm of arrows in the sky, he creates the illusion of rain With snake-arrows shot at intervals, he creates the effect of lightning "

"Our eyes are blessed today A hero of Arjuna's calibre is not to be found in Hastinapura, not in all Aryavarta "

"This is his last feat He'll pierce the target by sound alone His eyes are bandaged He picks up a sharp arrow, closes his eyes, draws it up to his lips, and remembers his guru He'll never find another guru like Drona in all the three worlds "

"Fortune-favoured Arjuna! Excellent son of Pandu! Before anyone could make out, guided by sound alone, he let fly a sharp shaft straight into the mouth of a dog barking behind his back Blessed be such an excellent archer!"

"Look! Guru Drona has extracted the arrow from the dog's mouth and is displaying it to everyone!"

"Someone has handed him the victory garland of blue lotuses "

Blue-lotus garland! Undefeated archer! Cloud-covered sky! One moment! One moment of fame and honour! What should I do? What should I do?

My mind thrashed about like a fire-ringed bird Would the inflamed pot of my body crack at last under the strain?

My eyes like restless birds pecked incessantly at the shrouding clouds A voice rose from the wounds, "One moment! One moment in the life of Karna! The only moment!' The clouds were massing and speeding with such furious force! Was there going to be another universal primeval churning in the sky of the ocean? I shook Shon's shoulder vigorously and shouted joyfully, "Shon! Look! The lord of the sky, my guru has come to save me! He is scattering the thick clouds as if they were a herd of goats!"

He embraced me hard, joyfully, and shouted, "Bhaiya! Go! Go in! Your flesh-ear-rings are adazzle again Not just a blue glow like before—they're shining red today!"

"You don't mean it, Shon? My rings shining again!"

"Yes, bhaiya And look—your Gurudeva has scorched away the dark-blue cloud canopy " With deep feeling he lifted both his hands to the sky

I looked up Countless dazzling sun-rays were smiling in the sky. It seemed that my Gurudeva had reined in his thousand-horsed chariot and was showering his blessings on me

Hastinapura, cooped up since dawn like a caged cock, now appeared like a rooster in boisterous cock-crow Tree leaves started shaking The distant Ganga waters gleamed Birds sang in ecstatic abandon In the far distance a cloud could be seen, gracefully sailing away Under its shadow the ancient palace of the Kauravas looked pale and ill

Commotion inside Sky-shattering commotion

"Look! Surya himself has parted the cloud-curtain in order to be present to welcome Arjuna Fortune-favoured Arjuna! Look, Guru Drona is climbing the steps of that magnificent platform With the Sun as witness, he will place the blue-lotus garland on Arjuna's neck Victory to Prince Arjuna!" The whole arena shook with the clamorous victory-shouts

I removed my shawl and flung it around Shon's shoulders Who I was then, I'm not certain I myself could tell Shon's elder brother? Ashvatthaman's friend? Or charioteer's son? *Chhee*! I was none of those I was glowing, molten steel! I was the crackle of lightning! I was a second sun, a second thousand-horsed sun!

I hadn't taken birth to stand like a beggar outside the gates of the arena My entire body was aflame with one desire—to reduce to ashes anyone who dared challenge me A magnificent message, never heard before, entered my ears *Karna, enter Now! This is your moment of truth* I rushed inside I saw the garland uplifted in Guru Drona's hands I raised both my hands and with all the energy I could summon I shouted, "Stop!"

My command pierced the arena like an arrow slicing into the heart of a target Its ferocity was such as to shame even the crash of lightning Thousands of eyes turned towards the arena entrance The garland slipped from Guru Drona's trembling hands to the ground Silence descended on the arena I slapped my palm hard on my left shoulder, the resounding clap reverberated through the entire arena

Waves of heat emanated from my flaming body The citizens moved aside to make way for me Those who did not, were scorched

by my body-heat. In no time at all I reached the stone platform, where Acharya Kripa was standing. I *pranamed* him formally as one should an elder, and leapt up four steps at a time to the top of the platform. Guru Drona was staring at me, surprised. This was the first time after six years that I was standing facing him proudly in this way. His face was paralysed with displeasure. Frowning, he asked, "And who are you?"

Glancing at the sky, *namaskaring* him formally as one should an elder, I replied confidently, "Karna."

Raising my arms and half-circling the assembled citizenry, I shouted, "Citizens of Hastinapura, you who honour justice and manliness! I am Karna, I am ready to perform whatever feats Prince Arjuna has displayed. Do I have your permission to do so?"

All stood up. Flapping their shawls, they shouted, "Let him show his feats. Let Prince Arjuna leave no challenge uncontested."

Maharaja Dhritarashtra heard the shouts and stood up. He turned and asked something of Bhishma, who was sitting next to him. He raised the royal sceptre, and a hush settled on the arena. His voice boomed like a cloud. "This arena is the final test of manly skill. Any hero of Hastinapura is welcome here. Gurudeva, let this brave youth be given a chance."

His decision was greeted by ubiquitous acclaim and approval. The arena bubbled with expectation, like milk boiling. Standing and clapping spectators sat down. Guru Drona, Acharya Kripa and Arjuna descended from the platform and stood on one side.

I glanced in the direction of the royal family enclosure, where Vidura, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Grandsire Bhishma, uncle Shakuni, the minister Vrishavarman and the invited rajas were sitting. Near their feet sat all the princes, including Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Durmukha, Dushkara, Vikarna, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and Yudhishthira. Among the princes I noticed Ashvatthaman also. Of them all, only four were smiling. Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Prince Duryodhana, Duhshasana, and my friend Ashvatthaman. Ashvatthaman raised his hand. I accepted silently this token of his affection. A thought leapt in my mind at this critical time, *Guru Drona's son is Ashvatthaman. But how different are father and son! One is a bubbling fountain of sweet water, the other a cloud-sombre ocean, salty, limitless, but not ready to accept in itself any water from outside.*

I looked at the section reserved for the royal ladies. But I saw nothing there except one curtain, a shimmering silk curtain.

Kneeling, I paid homage to Pitamaha Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, and the gleaming curtain

The silence was so total by now that one could hear each other's breathing

This was the moment for which Karna had waited more than six years, day in and day out, till his patience had stretched to breaking point The moment that emerged after six years' baking in the kiln of neglect and indifference! A postscript of a moment after six years of burning suffering! The moment crushed under six years of see-sawing suspicion and trust! The moment that would today make short shrift of all the manly feats shown in the past!

Today were two possibilities only—either Karna would return home with the victory garland of blue lotuses round his neck, or the citizens would return after trampling Karna's lifeless body underfoot The competition could end in no other way Total victory or death Six years of dedicated study under my guru had taught me one simple truth "Win or perish "

I folded my palms and looked up at the sky in anticipation of a blessing Staring fixedly, I greedily gulped the energy of the sun An incredibly powerful shaft of sunlight seemed to penetrate my entire being Karna was no longer Karna He was not a molten steel rod, he was not a flash of lightning, he was not Shon's brother, he was not Ashvatthaman's friend, he was not anybody's son, he was not a participating hero in the Hastinapura contest, nor was he a frustrated student seeking to impress Arjuna and Guru Drona with his brilliant exploits He did not even know where he was Nor was he interested to know, because he was now only a radiant ray of the refulgent Sun-God A flaming, shooting ray! An earth-piercing ray! He did not see any more the thousands of people facing him He did not hear any sound No clapping reached his ears The intense heat of his body no more disconcerted him He was now a beam of light, a beam that was part of an infinite miraculous radiance A beam of light with no independent existence, yet spontaneously contemplating its being in the three worlds A beam that baffled the universe A beam that sliced the womb of darkness A beam! A pure ray of light!

I leapt down from the platform I did not feel the slightest jerk In no time at all I reached the equestrian arena, where seven white steeds were tethered I stood on the back of one in the middle, and started urging the rest They raised their front hooves high and

neighed loudly No reins could hold them back now They were like seven puppets dancing to my tune I jumped easily from the seven galloping horses on to an elephant, placing my feet on both tusks and standing on them Without even a goad I rode that massive beast as I pleased

Next I entered the discus arena I whirled the massive chakra on my hand as if it were a *thali* Swiftly I swung it skywards As it fell I caught it on my little finger, threw it at my feet, and with my toes twirled it away into the distance

Then the sword arena—where I found two warriors standing, each brandishing two swords I picked up one sword and flourished it expertly, with single blows I slammed the swords away from their grasp They started rubbing their shoulders as if their arms had been wrenched from their bodies Still massaging their shoulders, they left the arena

Next I visited the spear arena Aiming five different spears at one time at five different targets, I ran forward and hurled them Then, rushing back, I released five more spears to pierce the handles of the first five Heaps of spears stuck out from the targets

I entered the wrestling arena, which was in front of the enclosure for the royal ladies There were three competitors waiting They looked to me no greater than three mounds of mud I flung aside my red garment, two of the three mounds of mud saw my skin, yellower than a ripe lemon, and instantly they raised their arms and conceded defeat True, one did challenge me to a duel Duel! It was win or perish! He clenched his teeth and rushed at me, but I pulverised him with a wrestling hold and pressed hard on his neck Thrashing his arms and legs he begged the Maharaja to spare his life The ladies' curtain rippled faintly The King raised his sceptre His life was spared

Finally, I entered the central arena dressed in yellow as an archer My shoulder shawl was blue Slowly I climbed the steps

Arrows whizzed from my bow like sharp quills from a porcupine, and pierced their targets like snakes slithering inside holes

I fixed a snake shaft It veered through obstacles in its path and stung its target

I created the illusion of torrential rain with swarms of arrows Shooting golden snake arrows in their dark midst, I created the effect of lightning

I sliced fruit flung in the sky, scattering the earth with countless flesh fragments The fruit was a solid mass thrown up, but the slices were powdery when they fell

Then—my ultimate feat Target pierced by sound-aim! Shoot by sound and hit the target A stupendous task Everywhere total silence First my eyes were bandaged I took a sharp arrow and touched it to my lips At that moment I did not want even to remember my guru, the reason being that I did not know who I was Who is the guru of a shaft of light and how is a shaft of light blessed?

The dog was tied behind me A worker stood by to prod the dog with lance point and make it bark I was making no distinction between the prodder, the dog, and the lance All that mattered was the target pierced-by-sound! I focused my mind on the sound waves that would emanate from the mouth and strike the chords of my ear.

The pores in my body became all ears I cautioned myself My ear-like eyes sought the source of the sound Going by the very first sound vibration, I had to pierce the target Silence all round like the silence in a cremation ground Everyone watching with bated breath Such soundlessness, such absolute calm that you could hear the next person s hearbeat A sweet sound struck my ears Hardly had the arrow sped from the bow than I heard the dog's barking Everything happened in a flash The arrow left the bow, I worriedly removed the blindfold and looked at the dog, still barking The arrow hadn't hit the dog's mouth I had missed my target My life had lost its purpose

A core of energy had deserted my being—and gone who knows where I felt grieviously tired and very depressed Shouts on all sides ' Victory to Prince Arjuna! Glory to Guru Drona!" Stinging shouts from hundreds of thousands of throats

How could this have happened? How could I have missed the sound-target? What was that sweet sound that struck my ears? Did the dog change his barking tone? And where did my arrow hit? In the cloud sky of my mind, these lightning queries flashed I felt the platform slipping from under my feet Where was I? On this earth? In heaven? Or in hell? And these applauders of Prince Arjuna—were they spirits in hell? The entire arena seemed to whirl around me I sat down instantly, and placed my head between my knees The blue lotus garland lay beneath my feet The glory garland! I picked it up with the intention of tearing it and scattering the pieces everywhere By this time Guru Drona and Arjuna had reached the

platform. I did the best I could to stand up. Guru Drona took the garland from my hands. Bhima, Yudhishthira and others, exulting, ran to the platform to felicitate Arjuna.

Karna had become a beggar in a kingdom of warriors, the scum of the realm of valour, simply because he couldn't hit the sound target. He did not have the unerring arrow that would make the whole world shudder. He alone gets respected who has that arrow. The world values valour, washes the feet of Valour. If you wish to live with honour, then—then you will have to pierce the sound target. Learn that skill, no matter where it is to be had. Then only will honour follow, otherwise you'll be cast aside, isolated. Had I jumped from the balcony face first on the ground below, my unfeeling head would not have burst. My helpless mind moaned. What now, what now? Repeatedly I thought of leaping down head first and performing the cremation rite of cracking the corpse's skull. But truth is cruel. There are times when it refuses to let a man die easily. I was born with impenetrable flesh-armour. Who will give shelter to Karna in this land of crazy people? Only his brother Shon. My eyes circled the arena for a glimpse of Shon. He was standing at the main gate, wiping his eyes with his shawl. His heart was breaking to witness his brother's fatal, bitter defeat. He needed consolation. Slowly I descended the stairs of the platform.

Guru Drona lifted his arm to place the blue lotus garland round Arjuna's neck. No end to the universal applause. 'Victory to Prince Arjuna! Glory to Guru Drona!" In the meantime, Grandsire Bhishma took the sceptre from Maharaja Dhritarashtra, lifted it skywards, and in a trembling voice shouted 'Wait!" But no one heard him clearly in that chaos of oceanic noise. Guru Drona placed the garland on Arjuna's neck. Claps resounded fiercely. One by one the spectators came down the platform. I was so dazed that I couldn't make out if I was alive or dead.

Grandsire Bhishma was trembling incontrollably. The golden sceptre of the Kauravas shook in his hand. Waving the uplifted sceptre he tried to attract the attention of the crowd. Prince Arjuna noticed this, and quickly raised his hand to signal the people to wait. Instantly the arena fell silent. Pitamaha Bhishma's quavering yet sharp voice pierced the heart of the silence. "Guru Drona! Citizens of Hastinapura! I, Bhishma, son of Ganga, eldest of the Kauravas, tell you this. Arjuna is not the supreme archer today."

Hearts atremble again A web of great confusion on the arena. The citizens whispered to each other Someone shouted, "Pitamaha, tell us then, who's the best archer?"

"Karna " The Grandsire's cloud-booming voice entered everyone's ears like an arrow

I and Shon were about to emerge out of the main gate when, hearing the voice, we turned back

"How's that?" Guru Drona asked quickly

' Guru Drona, your fondness for Arjuna has made you blind Not just blind, but deaf too Excess fondness is a defect "

"Tell us, Pitamaha, what happened?" came voices from all sides

"Only four men in this arena know how to shoot at the sound-target Karna, then Drona, Arjuna, and me " Bhishma said this with uplifted arm

The spectators were by now all gazing at Bhishma alone That gentle Kuru exemplar of Truth lashed at the spectators with his sharp tongue The white locks of his beard trembled as he spoke

' Of these four, Karna was, like Arjuna, a contestant Because his eyes were blindfolded, he was unable to see the arrow he fired That leaves me, Arjuna, and Drona But Arjuna and Drona focused their attention on the barking dog They heard nothing else But I can assure you that prior to the bark of the dog I heard a sweet sound Heroic Karna pierced that sound accurately That is why that jewel precious garland should hang round Karna's neck today "

'What kind of sound, Pitamaha?" Questions poured in from all sides "*What sound? What sound?*"

I recalled the time when I had first met him on the bank of the Ganga He had said then, "You are the only person I know who arrived at the Ganga's bank before I did " I was deeply moved I thought *Pitamaha, in the whole of Hastinapura you are the first humble and truth speaking person I have met Blessed is such dedication to truth*

Modulating his voice he said in a grave tone "Before the dog barked, a bird on the *tamal* tree opposite chirped after feeding her chick Karna fired as soon as he heard that chirp and hit her with unerring aim She s still there on the tree, with the sharp arrow in her mouth I can see her clearly from here The piercing of this target is superior to the piercing done by Arjuna Karna is the supreme hero today " He pointed a finger in the direction of the *tamal* Thousands of eyes followed his finger

A curious fowler ran towards the tree With great skill he brought back that bird, still frightened by the noise and confusion, and placed her in the hands of the Grandsire, who removed my sharp arrow embedded in the bird's beak She chirped sweetly again As soon as I heard her, the entire incident rushed back to me He released the bird into the sky Chirruping and fluttering, she flew back to her nest Reverberation of claps everywhere An ecstatic Shon embraced me at the main gate Acclamation on all four sides "Victory to brave Karna!" "Victory to Pitamaha Bhishma!" The entire arena seemed to be dancing like the waves of the Ganga Somewhere, a kokila trilled his melody on the branches of an *ashoka* In my mind was a weird medley of contradictory feelings Sometimes I was filled with respect for Grandsire Bhishma, and then suddenly I felt myself burning at the thought of Guru Drona placing the garland on Arjuna's neck Sometimes I overflowed with love for my loving brother who used to wipe the tears from my eyes, and the next moment I was all shaking with anger at Arjuna who dared to accept the victory garland Is the mind a colour-changing chameleon? God alone knows When such conflicting emotions affect a person, only one takes predominance—and that is anger Anger Anger's like fire It flames up when fanned by the wind of anything contrary All tender feelings are burnt to ashes in that massive conflagration And when this huge fire blazes up, it's very difficult to extinguish My lips trembled in anger, my flesh-ear-rings flamed red If I was indeed the supreme hero, then what business was it of Arjuna to sport that blue lotus victory garland? What is the point of having a truth-speaking, unbiased judge like Pitamaha Bhishma in a place like this?

My ears were assailed by words from all sides "We are fortunate today You will not find an archer of Karna's eminence in the whole of Aryavarta But, poor man, he never received his due "

How two-faced society can be! Always ready to trump up this person now, and some useless person another time!

"Our eyes have been blessed today Never have we seen, never have we heard of such target-skill! But the victory garland belongs to Karna's neck "

Their shallow sympathy was like ghee fuelling the fire of my anger

My blood, rushing through my veins, seemed to be shouting at me "You haven't been born, Karna, to bask in the indulgent

sympathy of the world Stand up, and complete your undoubted victory "

I threw my shawl towards Shon and mixed with the crowd surging towards the platform The moment I climbed the platform, they began waving their shawls wildly The arena had become a festival ground Justice and injustice, truth and untruth—no one seemed to care what all this meant As soon as I lifted my hand as a signal to them to wait, the multitude, out of affection, squatted on the ground Thousands of ears pricked up to listen to my words I raised my hands and proclaimed in a loud voice, "The blue lotus victory garland has not adorned my neck today My victory therefore is incomplete If anyone feels that it needs to be done, I am ready to issue another challenge to Arjuna to meet me in duel on this platform Only a duel can decide who is superior "

I was not looking for alms from anyone

The people rose to their feet, and began exclaiming, "Good! Good!"

What was Dhritarashtra going to decide?—this was uppermost in their minds A calm fell on the place By this time Acharya Kripa had risen from his seat and hurriedly ascended the platform He glanced at me with bitter scorn After paying homage to the Maharaja, he said, "I am Acharya Kripa, Gurudeva of Karna's class It is true, Maharaja, that Karna is my disciple But I have no information about his family Nor has he breathed a word about his lineage to anyone Prince Arjuna is born in a Kshatriya family According to the rules of war-craft and dharma, only those of the same caste are allowed to duel First, Karna must reveal his brilliant background to this assembly of Hastinapura citizens Then only will Arjuna decide if and when to duel with him, because the end result of a duel is always victory or death "

His words punctured me with the sharpness of spear-points What family background could I name, standing on that platform where heroic skill was tested? Did I have the courage to inform all these illustrious descendants of the solar dynasty that I was the son of a charioteer? For a moment I was lost in a welter of thoughts Lowering my head, I pondered Two powerful possibilities vied for supremacy One shouted "Tell them, Karna, tell them with pride, 'I am Adhiratha and Radha's son, the charioteer's son Karna I am Shon's brother, Karna I am Karna the charioteer ' The other said 'There are only narrow-minded people here How will they ever

accept the fact of your caste?' They will sneer and say, 'What? Charioteer's son? So why is he here? Pack him off to the stables.'"

My mind plant vacillated in the windy buffets of my indecision. My neck wilted, like a lotus under the onslaught of rain. Someone was climbing the platform. Wearily I raised my head and looked. It was Prince Duryodhana. The same imposing gait. The same sharp, pointed nose. The same piercing eyes. He approached and in words that struck like a whiplash, with fists clenched, rolling his keen eyes and pacing around the platform, he said, "Gurudeva Acharya Kripa is making a cruel mockery of the contest. Kshatriya! How is Karna in any way less than a Kshatriya? How do the books of dharma define a Kshatriya? He who has powerful arms— he who rules his own kingdom—and he who is born in a royal family. Karna has made it abundantly clear, by the force of his manly skill, that he is a Kshatriya. If this is not sufficient to convince anyone, I—Duryodhana—will prove that he is indeed a Kshatriya and that the duel should take place. I, Prince Duryodhana, hereby proclaim that, from this instant, on this platform, in everyone's presence, brave, illustrious and valiant Karna is, by my authority, declared Raja of Anga. From this very moment the land of Anga, adjacent to Magadha, which was till now in the possession of the Kauravas, belongs to Karna. Karna is now the Raja of Anga."

He turned his strong neck and took everyone's permission. Not a murmur from any side. He curved his thick eyebrows even further and clapped his hands to summon an attendant. In an instant the platform was crowded with attendants. He gave them the proper instructions. "Fetch the throne." "Get the lustral water." "Call the *purohita*."

In no time at all a golden throne had been placed on the platform, followed by the anointing water and the royal vestments, on which lay a gold crown and a silver sword. Two elderly Brahmins trailed behind. Flowers were distributed to everyone present. The fragrance of sandalwood and musk oil spread ubiquitously. Kettle-drums and *dundhubi* drums sounded. The arena was transformed into an area for the performance of an auspicious ceremony. It was impossible to guess what was going on.

Whispers everywhere. "We've never heard of a coronation like this in the city of Hastinapura from the days of Maharaja Manu till the times of Maharaja Dhritarashtra."

"Good! That brave man is finally getting what he richly deserves."

"But what next—what after the coronation is over? What will be the outcome of the duel?"

After the preparations had been made, Raja Duryodhana took me by my arm and seated me on the throne. The elderly Brahmins began melodiously intoning the sacred mantras Where a little while ago had been clapping, shouts and heated discussion, there was now the echoing of mantras My head was sprinkled with sanctifying water from different rivers of Aryavarta—the Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Sindhu, Gomati, and many others On the one hand, my head was drenched with these waters, on the other, my mind was drenched with the pure Ganga of affection that Prince Duryodhana had showered on me How immediately helpful he was, how generous! Suppose he hadn't come to my aid today, what then? The very thought unnerved me Karna had loved only a few, very carefully chosen individuals his parents and his brother, then Ashvatthaman, next Pitamaha Bhishma, and now Prince Duryodhana But Prince Duryodhana's case was very different from the others, because he had elevated, with his own hands, me, a person fallen to the depths of shame He had in the twinkling of an eye metamorphosed a non-entity into a raja And Karna would reserve for ever and ever a special corner of his heart for Prince Duryodhana Sitting on the throne, I made up my mind that this was going to be so

He placed the golden crown on my golden locks, and draped the royal vestments round my shoulders Lifting the silver sword high above his head and waving it, he proclaimed "Karna, Raja of Anga—' And the others chorused "Victory to him!"

My mind was filled with grateful respect for Duryodhana for showing such reckless courage An indescribable joy gleamed in his lotus eyes I wanted to embrace him tightly The citizens were loudly acclaiming the title bestowed on Karna, "the Raja of Anga " A charioteer's son had become an emperor! Something that neither Guru Drona nor Acharya Kripa could do in six years, something that very likely they could not have done in a whole lifetime, had been achieved in a flash today by Duryodhana Mace hero Duryodhana Prince Duryodhana Injustice-battling Duryodhana Recogniser-of-valour Duryodhana *Chhee!* My *friend* Duryodhana My dear-as-life companion Duryodhana Two tears of intense gratefulness welled up in my eyes—as if they were telling Duryodhana, 'Prince Duryodhana, you have today set a dust-

trodden lotus in a crown You have picked up a jewel lying in the dust and embraced it You have stood by me in insult My life now is all yours, only yours "

The citizens rained flower on me from all sides My heart brimmed over with their love Even if I took part in the duel now, what did it matter? Where else would I get the opportunity to meet a noble death? A death for a hero who has received a flowery ovation A death sitting on a throne? So, for Prince Duryodhana's sake I *will* fight the duel today with all my life I *will* settle my six-year-old score My day-and-night duel training *will* find its acid test today The strength of my arms *will* be decided today Arjuna *will* be rendered lifeless today

I was in need of another blessing too my mother's If only she had been present in the arena today! I am sure she would have run to me and embraced me to her bosom She would have repeatedly kissed my head and my flesh-ear-rings in everyone's presence—exactly as she kissed me when I was young Is there any mother who can restrain her joy when she sees her son crowned emperor? But she was absent today Only father happened to be in Hastinapura—but where he was in the midst of all this teeming crowd, I had no idea

My eyes surveyed the arena In the far distance, near the main entrance, stood father How tired he looked Within six years all his hair had turned white His back was bent His neck trembled with the effect of old age He stood there, supported by the stick in his hand, with great difficulty What must he be feeling hearing the applause for his son? How anxious he must be to go near his son! But who was there to assist him to me?

I glanced at Shon I think he immediately guessed the message in my eyes Swiftly he descended the stairs and disappeared in the crowd Pushing his way through with both hands, he reached father Holding father by one hand, and with the other pushing people aside, he made his way in my direction I rose The people thought I was going to announce my participation in the duel But my mind was eager to meet father I needed his blessing

In no time at all Shon brought father to the platform

Seeing the golden crown I was wearing, his neck began trembling even more His stick wobbled His eyes filled I bent and touched his feet with my crowned head Two tears fell from his eyes on my head I was blessed Two tear drops of love fell on a head that had

already been purified with the lustral waters of the Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati and other rivers. Now truly had the anointing of the raja of Anga been fulfilled. What purer water could there be than these two tear drops?

My throat choked at the memory of all the countless hardships that he had suffered on my account.

He raised me up and said in a quavering voice, "Karna!"

I replied in the same emotional tone, "Pita-ji!"

He enfolded me in his embrace. His stick slipped from his hand and fell. The arena witnessed our embrace in breathless silence. For a moment no one seemed to know what was actually happening on the platform. All were waiting patiently to witness the duel.

Acharya Kripa saw me call out "Pita-ji!" and touch my father's feet. Immediately he came forward, raised his hand, and shouted "Karna is a charioteer's son. The question of a duel between him and Prince Arjuna does not arise. Karna is the son of the Maharaja's charioteer, Adhiratha."

Hearing this, the massive-bodied Bhima lumbered up from among the group of princes where he was sitting. Twirling his fingers contemptuously at me, he said, "What's that you said? Charioteer's son? What's he doing among these warriors then? Tell him to do his family business and go brandish a whip. Leave this place! Massage the horses in the stables and collect their dung! What gives him the right to climb the illustrious platform of the Kaurava dynasty? What audacity!"

All the princes burst out in censorious laughter. The noise increased everywhere. They began whispering to each other. "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" I anguished, I wanted to cry—sitting on the throne.

Those words, growing louder in volume each time, entered my ears like flaming arrow-heads, "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!"

Ten, twenty, hundred, thousands of voice-arrows whizzed through the air. "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!"

Had Hastinapura lost the ability today to discriminate between truth and untruth? Had the flame of knowing justice from injustice flickered out in Hastinapura today? Was there no one in Hastinapura with courage enough to hear the broken-hearted cry of Karna? No one with courage enough to see the suffering mind of Karna? The Hastinapura of Maharaja Manu, the Hastinapura of famed

Nahusha, the Hastinapura of all-conquering Yayati, the Hastinapura of Shantanu, Dushyanta and Bharata—the Hastinapura of those gurus whose memory is still green in the minds of its citizens, the gurus who had only recently departed to the land of the hereafter—why was that Hastinapura so cold and lacklustre today? Why did that Hastinapura lack confidence to battle boldly with injustice today? The injustice done to Karna—the insult shown to a warrior on the rostrum for heroes Today truth was being butchered on the altar of lies in the sacrificial ceremony of pride, and the followers of dharma—Vidura, Dhritarashtra, and Pitamaha Bhishma—were tolerating it with bowed heads When will they speak up? What will they say? Why are they silent? Putting aside all my respectful feelings for them for a moment, I felt constrained to ask them if they were born merely to wear a golden crown and sit on a high seat? Were you born merely to ride in chariots pulled by swift and proud horses on the roads of Hastinapura? Why were you silent today? Why don't you dare use your voices to protest this injustice to Karna? If subjects cannot turn with hope to their monarch, who can they turn to? With full expectation I kept gazing at the members of the royal family. Not a word from them Voices from all sides "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" With clenched fists the people were shouting violently in the direction of the south-west: "Charioteer's son! Massager of horses!"

What a mad world it is! A minutes ago it had set Karna on the pinnacle of glory, hymned his praises so loudly—and now it had already started denigrating him My head whirled I wanted to fling my crown in the dust of Hastinapura Stuffing my ear-ring lobes in my ears and pressing my ears with my palms, I helplessly raised my head My Gurudeva was standing in the sky My buffeted mind, grasping his countless ray-like fingers and shaking them vigorously and clinging to them, said, "Gurudeva, you are burning up there. In spite of your presence, I have been grievously insulted today. Why was I made a charioteer? Is it my fault I am a charioteer? Has anyone ever been able to choose his or her birth? The citizens of Hastinapura today are belittling a student in front of his guru What shall I do? They're hurting me, hitting me from all sides Where can I hide?" I covered my face with both hands in shame, in an agony of near-death. I wanted the platform to crack open and the earth-womb to swallow me up

A tumult somewhere made me raise my head. All the attendants were rushing to the royal ladies' enclosure. One ran up to the platform. Panting, he whispered to blue-skinned Arjuna wearing the blue-lotus garland, "Prince, the Queen Mother Kunti Devi has fainted." Arjuna flung away his garland and ran down the platform to the enclosure. The spectators were shouting all this while: "Charioteer's son!"

Intending to fling aside my crown and leave, accompanied by father, I touched the crown. I felt someone patting my back. It was Duryodhana. Stroking my back with his left hand, and lifting his right hand in a clenched fist, he said, "Be careful. Karna is the raja of Anga. Duryodhana's friend. I will grind underfoot any haughty heads that make fun of him as a charioteer. Karna is no longer Karna, he is Karna, the king of Anga. He is Prince Duryodhana's friend." His lotus eyes emitted fire. In a high-pitched voice he said again, "This arena is reserved for the illustrious heroes of the Kaurava dynasty. No insult to any warrior will be tolerated here. Today's events are over. The citizens can go home." Without glancing in the direction of Guru Drona, he concluded the day's programme.

The citizens rose, preparing to leave. The blue-lotus garland was crushed under their feet. The garland of invincibility—trodden into dust!

Overwhelmed with emotion, I embraced Duryodhana. From today Karna was Prince Duryodhana's friend. His strength, body, mind, weapons-knowledge—all were at the service of Prince Duryodhana. Taking his hand in mine and pressing it warmly, I said, "King I, Karna, Raja of Anga, give you my word today—to you only—that I will faithfully be with you all my life with the same determined Meru-like strength with which you have helped me today. I will give up my life, but I will not swerve from my loyalty."

He stared for a moment at my flesh-ear-rings. The citizens had all left. The arena was empty. I, Shon, Duryodhana and father descended the platform. Hoping to make my final *namaskara* to the setting sun, I gazed westwards. A black cloud had shrouded the sun. In the fading darkness the small contesting arenas in the amphitheatre assumed weird shapes. The horses in the equestrian arena circled aimlessly. The garland which Shon had placed on the royal Kaurava crest was still there, but all withered. The Kaurava pennant was not fluttering though, it was still.

37

I couldn't sleep that night, as on other days. The incidents from the morning kept dancing before my eyes. What an upheaval had taken place in a single day! That I was a charioteer—why did that fact have to be so painful to me today? After all, what is Kala, lord of Time? Isn't he a charioteer too? He whips the human horses to such incredible speeds! I would never have believed an astrologer who predicted the events of today. But the events did take place. First, the people applauded heroic Karna, and then insulted him as the charioteer's son. Whom others called charioteer, Duryodhana called friend. Duryodhana! Extraordinarily courageous! Why was he the only one to think of taking revenge for the insult that I had received? Because he loved me, or because he hated Arjuna? Or was it because he was angry with Bhima? A white ant of doubt crawled out of the fissure of my mind. I tossed all night in bed, restless. Sleep simply would not come. Sleep curveted like a nervous calf frightened by a loud noise. No matter how often I called, she refused to enter the cowpen of my eyes.

I came out from my room in the military academy. The full moon was showering the earth with silvery radiance from her pot. The distant star Arundhati watched, with bitter, blinking eyes, the generosity lavished by the moon on the earth. My mind was cleared of the clouds of doubt. The cool waves of the Ganga caressed my shoulders and seemed to say: Come, see how my countless daughters are dancing in silver dresses.

I wrapped the shawl around myself and came out of the academy. Right behind the academy flowed the Ganga. Occasionally I heard a red sheldrake flapping its wings on the branch of an *ashoka*. I reached the tranquil bank of the Ganga. What a spectacular witness! How many generations of the Kaurava dynasty had she observed! How many remarkable changes had she calmly reflected in her waters! I sat on a black stone ledge and gazed at her silvery lovely form. I heard a gurgling sound at a distance. A human shape bent over the Ganga's waters. Who had come at night to fetch water? I shouted, "Who's there?"

The form, carrying a water pot on its shoulder, slowly approached me. My curiosity deepened. A burly, tall individual stood in front of me. The pot on his shoulder made him lean his head to one side. He was steadying the pot with both hands. As soon as he came near me, he said, "I am Satyasena."

"Satyasena!" I began rooting through the fabric of memory A stray thread was in my grasp, but I couldn't be certain of what and where It seemed to me that I had certainly heard the name of Satyasena somewhere I asked again, "Satyasena who?"

'Satyasena, the charioteer from Prayag "

Prayag! The confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna! My curiosity grew I asked once more, "At this time of night, in Hastinapura, on the bank of the Ganga—Why?"

"I had heard of the fame of the Kaurava Maharaja Dhritarashtra. I came here in the hope that my chariot-skill will be appreciated in Hastinapura My sister Vrishali and my mother have come with me "

"Vrishali!" The word came out of my lips with graceful ease.

"Yes We had hoped to be here during daylight But one of our horses sprained his leg in the thick forest of Kampilya, and we were forced to slow down We have just arrived here "

"Has the hospitality of Hastinapura so fallen that you have been reduced to fetching water at this time of night?"

' No, that's not so We are not staying with anyone I don't know anyone here I have left mother and sister in the precincts of the Vishnu Mandir The travel had made mother very thirsty, and so I came here for water But, sir, who are you?"

"I m no Sir, I'm Karna," I removed his misconception

"Karna? You mean uncle Adhiratha of Champanagari " He said this staring at my flesh-ear-rings

"Yes, I'm his son "

He kept repeatedly looking at my flesh-ear-rings, though he had difficulty doing so because of the pot on his shoulder I said, "You can go If you can make it, meet me tomorrow at the military academy "

Steadying the pot, he left, the sand squelching under his feet Gusts of cool breeze brushed against me To prevent the shawl from slipping, I flung one end of it over my right shoulder and across my back I felt something strike against my back What could it be? I pulled back the shawl end and examined it Something tied in a knot Eagerly I opened it A shard of a broken pot I had hurriedly draped an old shawl when leaving my room For an instant I felt like throwing the shard away—but I checked myself Playing with it, I walked back home, the sand squelching under my feet

38

The next day I kept a look-out for Satyasena. He did not turn up. Why he did not come, and also to find out if all was well with him, I dspatched Shon to the Vishnu Temple.

The story he told me on returning was heart-touching. A little after Satyasena returned from the Ganga, his old mother, as a consequence of the travail of travel, started vomiting blood. She passed away in the sacred precincts of the Vishnu Mandir, leaving her two children to the care of Lord Vishnu.

Satyasena was definitely in need of help. I sent Shon again with the instruction that he bring Satyasena with him this time. All alone in the massive city of Hastinapura! It was just a coincidence that we two met last night on the bank of the Ganga. It's coincidences anyway that dictate what a man has to do in life. And man gets the credit for doing what he does.

BOOK 2

KUNTI

1

The wet nurse asks, "Why are you so sad, Maharani-ji?" How can I tell her the reason for my sadness? How many stormy turnings my life has taken! And what is the significance of all these turnings? Who makes human beings take these turnings? Who's in charge of such proceedings? Is man just one more creature trapped in the trammels of fate?

Here I am, standing today in the hall of the palace, surrounded by multifarious oppulence Servants and maids stand ever-ready to satisfy my every whim All Hastinapura honours me, bowing its head at my feet and proclaiming, "Raj- mata! The Queen Mother!" Why should I feel unhappy when I have a pious son like Yudhishthira, a stalwart son like Bhima, and a son like Arjuna so close to the hearts of the people? What woman in the world could expect more than this? Who wouldn't be proud of a life like this? In the eyes of the world haven't I achieved the pinnacle of success? What is known as happiness, surely cannot be anything but this

But how can that be? It cannot be that happiness is dependent on such external factors When the mind is at peace, then only is life happy I am the Queen Mother, and in this splendid palace, and yet my mind is ill at ease Just one deniable incident, like an ugly rat, has gnawed away at my vesture, night after night

Whenever I stand here in this hall as I am doing now and gaze at that magnificent main door of the palace, my mind, like a dry leaf tossed in a storm, flies away to some far distance, and it returns to the cage of my body bringing back with it fifty years of my life Fifty bygone years ! How many days has Kunti passed as Kunti during these fifty years?—Not one Such a long time, fifty years, and yet how miserly and how lifeless In these fifty years Time has not provided Kunti one day that she could call her own. In these fifty years Time has strapped my neck with attractively-named, multicoloured nooses and whirled me about as he desired, whichever side he wanted me to move

From the cloudy sky of my mind the rain of remembered life pours down incessantly. Sometimes the downpour is so torrential I fear its repeated blows will simply pulverise me.

What has not happened in these fifty years! *Chhee*! There's nothing *that* memorable. There's nothing that a Kshatriya lady like me would eagerly like to recall. But the mind is a strange thing. The more you enslave it, the more it becomes free.

In these fifty years, I have been three different Kuntis living three different lives, none comparable in any way with the others—no similarity between any of the three. These three Kuntis are totally distinct from each other. Sometimes they stare fixedly at each other, and question each other as if they were strangers. "Who are you? Who? *Arri*, who are you?"

From this hall I can see the distant Ganga. Its meanderings remind me of Mathura, and of my childhood, which was spent near the Yamuna.... Yes, and then, like words released from the mouth, it never came back to me again. But its memories are vividly etched in my mind.

Childhood means a circle of fragrant joy. Childhood means high hopes, clear crystal colours, where no deceiving masks are worn. No envy, no jealousy. Childhood is a cup of cool water which nature provides in advance to a person about to embark on a journey through the desert of life.

Whenever I remember now my Mathura days, I ask myself why did I ever grow up. Why did I step out of that holy city of Maharaja Shatrughna?

I was called Pritha then, the Pritha who chased butterflies in the palace gardens in Mathura, the Pritha who frolicked in the Yamuna's waters, the Pritha who strung *vakula* blossoms for the worship of the Sun-God—the gentle and pure Pritha. Pritha? Yes, Pritha. Not the slightest pain or sorrow touched me, for I was brought up in the loving care of my father, Raja Shurasena of Mathura. He was what his name indicated—"Shura", the Brave One, strong and determined. He belonged to the Yadava clan. I will always be proud of him. No sooner do I think of him than his handsome frame appears in front of my eyes.

Was there ever a wish of mine that he did not fulfil? I remember clearly the strange request I once made: "Give me a bow." He was astonished, and he replied: "Prithe, a bow—for a girl? A girl should ask for flowers, for gold ornaments."

Of course I didn't listen to his words Fed up, in the end he got me a bow If by any chance anyone had placed the twinkling stars of the sky in my hands, calling them the fruits of the precious medicinal herb *karanjava*—I would have pointblank refused to part with my bow in exchange Bow in hand, I danced into the palace garden I started shooting arrows at random at trees right and left A female *patraratha* bird atop a *vakula* tree kept irritating me with ceaseless shrieking Distracted by her, I was unable to shoot straight I lost my temper, and a gruesomely pleasing thought entered my head If only I knew how to shoot straight, I would have fired direct into the bird's beak to stop her insistent shrieks

2

One evening as usual, I was playing in the palace garden A maid called Chandrika was culling full-blown flowers for puja, and I was running, hands raised, after an iridescent, intoxicated little butterfly fluttering here and there Chandrika called out to me, very loudly

'Rajkumari, quick, come here! Look at this enchanting sight!"

I stopped pursuing the butterfly and ran towards Chandrika She was standing under an *ashoka*, eagerly waiting for me, secretively holding something I danced up to her, curious to find out what she was hiding As soon as I came close to her, she opened her palm slowly What was in her palm? A new-born baby lark, opening its sweet little beak and cheeping for help, its small rose-hooded eyes wide with fear and constantly blinking, its tiny neck craned upwards for expected succour It was a pitiful sight

I asked Chandrika, 'Where did you find this bird? You're wicked! Its mother will tire herself out searching for her baby I don't like it at all! Go, free it this very instant!"

Suddenly, hearing my scolding, all her enthusiasm dampened Flustered, she stammered out the truth "I—I didn't bring it from its nest, princess I found it flying by itself on the grass Must be, its nest is on this *ashoka* tree itself "

I peered through the thick leaves to find its nest, but in vain I couldn't decide what to do The little bird repeatedly raised its neck I thought suddenly of father I turned and ran to the palace I remember vividly taking three steps at a time up the stairs Father had just returned from the town of Bhojpura, and hadn't even

changed Near him stood a guest He stared hard at me My excitement abated a little under his stare, but he realised I was bursting to say something He said, "Prithe, don't be bashful I'm no stranger I am Kuntibhoja, your father's cousin, his aunt's son *Arri*, I'm your uncle "

I recovered, stepped forward, clutched father's fingers, pulled him towards me, and said, "Father, come to the garden with me I have something to show you "

He got the impression that it was something important Placing his hand on my shoulder and glancing in th direction of his guest, he said, "Come Kuntibhoja, let's see what this little girl has to show us "

Seeing the three of us approaching, Chandrika was stupefied She was holding a basket of flowers in one hand and the lost baby bird in the palm of the other, and she couldn't adjust her shawl properly She stood there, perplexed, with head bowed, like some criminal

We stood under the *ashoka* I scooped the bird from Chandrika's hand I can still recall the warm feel of the little creature Showing it to father, I explained, "Its nest is up there, but it must have fallen accidentally Its mother must be frantic Please restore it to its nest, right now "

He looked at me curiously and said, "Why, shouldn't a mother feel for her baby? No mother should go too far from her child "

"She probably went to get grub for it," I said

He stared at me, smiled, and looked around to see if any attendants were near There was no one in the garden Darkness was slowly falling The bird was cheeping restlessly in my hands, as if desperately anxious to rest in the warm haven of a feathery maternal breast I couldn't bear it any longer. I sobbed, "Father, please hurry! See how restless it is!" He guessed the extent of my grief, and said, "Bring it here I'll restore it to its nest in the morning "

"In the morning? How will it survive without its mother till then? Please do it *now* "

He came near me and tried to reason with me "Prithu, why are you so stubborn? There's not a single attendant here—how can I restore it to its nest right now? See that it's safely cuddled tonight in your soft bed Feed it grain and water And next morning I'll see that it's returned to its nest, all right?"

"But *you* are here, father! What need is there of an attendant? If it isn't placed right back in its nest this very moment, I won't go back to the palace I'll sit here, with the bird, all night through "

Father said to Kuntibhoja, "How do I explain anything to this girl? She's so stubborn "

He said, "Shurasena, you may be the raja of Mathura, but how does that affect this little girl? She'll carry on behaving like this in front of you " He turned to me and said, "Hand me the bird, child I'll return it to its mother Does that make you happy?"

He stepped forward to take the bird from me Father also advanced and, gently removing the bird from my hand, said, "Kuntibhoja, you are a guest How can you climb a tree so long as I am here? Will anyone honour me as the raja of Mathura after that? Or as father of Prithu?"

Father removed his shawl and sandals and placed them on the grass Quickly he strode towards the *ashoka*, and clambered up like a squirrel A little later he shouted from above, "Child, I've found the nest!" Restoring the bird, he began climbing down I clapped joyfully I was *so* proud of father that day I made up my mind that I would never ever refuse father anything

He leapt down A toad of doubt plopped in my mind I held his hand and quickly asked, "But Pita-ji, you're sure it was the *right* nest, wasn't it?"

Placing a hand on my shoulder he replied, "You silly thing, you think I don't even know that much? There were five other little birds in that nest, just like your bird "

We returned to the palace in the fading dusk

"Shurasena, what a sweet girl you have," Maharaja Kuntibhoja of Bhojpura caressed my head and said to father

That night I had dream after dream of that lost little bird

3

Next day father and Maharaja Kuntibhoja sat in the chariot for the return journey to Bhojpura I approached father to ask him to bring blue lotuses for me, and he said, "Come with us, Prithe, we're taking you to Bhojpura " I stared at him in astonishment, because I had never been out of Mathura in my life This was the first time father had asked me to accompany him on a journey I had no idea where Bhojpura was, or what kind of city it was I stood there,

dumbfounded I had never been scolded by father before, but now he said sternly, "Didn't you hear me, Prithe? Come, quickly "

I sat down, with head bowed, in the chariot I didn't even get a chance to say farewell to mother I was on the point of going to her, but father stopped me What will mother say when I return?

I thought *Dearest mother, forgive me I am leaving the palace without your darshan, without your blessing I am going out of Mathura I am leaving Yamuna behind*

Chandrika was watering the flowers in the garden She waved me farewell She wanted to ask, "Where are you going, princess?" but she was only a maid and she dare not appear in front of her monarch

4

Ten days later we reached Bhojpura in the evening It was a small town, but very pretty I liked the place

I had the impression that we would be welcomed by the royal ladies at the palace with the ceremonial *arati* greeting, because that was the custom in Mathura But we were greeted by an ordinary maid in Bhojpura I was puzzled by this

We entered by the main gate I was pleased by the sight of the wide open space in front of the palace There was a small garden in one corner—otherwise the whole area was open The palace was striking It faced the east I heard that the open space was intended for army inspections

Eight days passed in Bhojpura in no time at all I kept remembering Mathura, constantly thinking of my dear mother On the ninth day father instructed that the chariot be readied for departure I was drowned in memories of Mathura but but I never went back to Mathura again I wanted to, but it was not to be

Before climbing into the chariot, father summoned me Maharaja Kuntibhoja was present Pointing to him, father said, "Prithe, you will stay here from today He is your father and mother "

I couldn't make out what he meant

I felt like a sleeping child taken and stranded in a fearful forest I knew no one here If someone in Bhojpura asked me in which direction Mathura lay, I could not have told him—and here was father clearly saying, "You will have to stay here "

Was he making fun of me? My child-mind instantly filled with fear and suspicion Why should I stay here? If he didn't like me, he could take me back with him to Mathura and leave me there wherever he liked I would be content But how was it possible for me to stay all by myself in this city? Do elders behave so cruelly sometimes? The father who presented me with a bow, the father who sat me next to him sweetly saying "Prithu, Prithu," the father who clambered up a tree like a squirrel because I asked him to—could that father lie and deceive? Or was it that I was stubborn, and he had discovered a special way of teaching me a lesson? I asked tearfully, "Why, father? Why should I stay here? For what reason? Don't you like me? If so, take me back to Mathura, and leave me there, anywhere you like I'll never be stubborn again, I promise, not even by mistake "

"It's not that, Prithu I really love you But to Kuntibhoja I gave word to this cousin " His voice sounded thick He thumped my shoulder as he said this This was my first experience of his choking voice

My child-mind reeled under the assault of doubts and fears What more was there left to hear? Promise? What promise? Promise given to whom? And why? What is a promise anyway? In my perplexity I asked, 'What promise?"

"Listen," he said heavily, "Twelve years ago Kuntibhoja and I went hunting near Bhojpura We roamed in the forests of the Nishadha hill but saw no game Exhausted, we returned Outside the town, we and our horses drank water from a river, and relaxed under the luxuriantly leafy sal trees Kuntibhoja looked very depressed that day I thought it was the fruitless hunt that had made him sad I did ask, 'Kuntibhoja, why are you so sad today?' He kept looking at me I took his hand in mine, and said affectionately, 'Tell me everything, king Sadness, shared, is sadness reduced ' He replied, 'Shurasena we went hunting today But isn't man also a hunted animal—of Fate, that is? Ah, what a burden my childless life has become for me! Fame and glory without a son is like the sky without the sun I just want to hand over this prosperous kingdom to my general and retire to the Himalayas '"

"I squeezed his hand and replied, 'That's all, is it? Raja Kuntibhoja, I, Shurasena, the Yadava monarch of Mathura, hereby tell you that I will give my first-born to you You are a Kshatriya, and you must never think of giving up your kingdom '"

"Overjoyed, he embraced me We rode back to the city, where I stayed a few days before returning to Mathura You were born that year itself Prithe, Raja Kuntibhoja is that same cousin of mine Child, I have to keep my word—and you have to do your duty "

I was looking at both of them through half-closed eyes Nowhere in his speech did I hear the word "promise", so I asked, "Father, what is this thing called 'promise'?"

Instantly he turned and replied, "'Promise' means to fulfil whatever you have said Child, I did tell Kuntibhoja that I will give you to him " Tears welled up in his eyes

My father who had scrambled up an *ashoka* for me was weeping today because he had to keep his word That day, under the *ashoka*, I had made up my mind that I would never deny him anything That he should cry on account of me! I steadied myself, stepped closer to him, and said, "Father, if you say so, I will stay here But please don't cry Don't feel sad " He pressed me to his heart His massive frame shook like a trembling pipal He said to Maharaja Kuntibhoja, "King, take care of this gift which I have loved above life itself Even her mother does not know that I have brought her here with me Had she known, she would never have allowed her to leave Mathura "

I remembered mother and my heart overflowed with feeling He unsheathed his sword Its sharp blade flashed He knicked his right thumb along the keen edge, a trickle of blood appeared, which he smeared on my forehead I still remember that warm touch Sheathing the sword, he cupped my face in both hands and said, "Remember, Prithe, you are a Kshatriya king's daughter Never forget this Promise you won't?" He bent and kissed my forehead The tika of blood got rubbed off by his lips Tears from his eyes slipped into his beard

He turned quickly and climbed into his chariot He cracked his whip, and the chariot surged forward Dust scattered up My child-like mind was all upset I raised my hands and screamed, "Pita ji! Wa i-i-t!" Maharaja Kuntibhoja stopped me, saying, "My child, a Kshatriya does not turn back "

Head bowed, I said, "I wasn't stopping him so that he would take me with him I wanted to give him this memento for my mother I never got the chance to see her before leaving " I extended my ring towards him

I stepped forward, *pranama ed* him, and said, "Your daughter Kunti *pranama-es* her father "

My unexpected reply made him sentimental He raised me up and, embracing me as father used to do, he said, "Kunti *beti*, don't be sad You will not even need to remember your father here, but if you don't stay here, bad days are certain for our palace For fourteen years I have looked forward to this day, this palace has looked forward to a royal lady "

"I will never leave here for anywhere else " I clung to him and said in full faith and determination

He thumped my back His eyes were swimming with tears as he lifted me and took me to the palace None else but the main gates of Bhojpura witnessed this incident

5

There are times when certain incidents have the extraordinary power to totally alter a human being That day I was transformed from a green girl into a serious, soft-speaking young lady Unknowingly that incident made me grow up, it metamorphosed me The age at which most children can get away with petulance and obstinacy saw me attending to all the responsibilities of running a palace Father did not once look back to see what happened to his daughter He tied me like a goat to the stake of his given word in Bhojpura—and he left I was his daughter, after all So I made up my mind also that, no matter what, there was no returning to Mathura for me One by one the days passed I did often think of Mathura, but I wiped out the memories with a firm will, because I was not Pritha here, I was Kunti, a renowned Maharaja's only daughter I was the only royal lady in the palace of Bhojpura So who could this girl called Pritha be? Pritha was a free butterfly in the life of Kunti, Pritha was a ripple of wind in the life of Kunti, Pritha was the greenery of Kunti, Pritha was the flowery bed of Kunti's life, Pritha was the fragrance of Kunti, Pritha was merely a dream in Kunti's life, only a dream Sometimes dreams also delight the mind, and Pritha's memories delighted me in the same way After all, I did not have anything else to make me happy except memories of her headstrong, innocent ways

Seeing it, he became silent Then he said, "Child, give me the ring I'll see it reaches her Not the ring only, you too Raja Shurasena has kept his word But he has also tested me today I will prove to him that Kuntibhoja of Bhojpura is not heartless " A strange passion shone in his eyes He clapped his hands and a servant appeared He wanted to drive a second chariot, with me in it, and catch up with father I don't know what suddenly happened to me I removed the shawl from my shoulder, draped it over my head, stepped forward, bowed and *namaskara-ed* him, and said, "Your adopted daughter Pritha offers you obeisance, father "

He quickly motioned me up and, looking at me, said in a heavy voiçe, "Fortunate indeed is Raja Shurasena who has fathered such a self-controlled daughter like you But, child, you will never feel at home here I may not have children of my own, but I do understand how a child feels It is not required that one should be the sky in order to appreciate the colours of the rainbow "

"No, father, from now this is my birthplace, and this is my Mathura," I said bravely God knows who it was that spoke so confidently through me, but it certainly wasn't the butterfly-chasing Pritha, and it wasn't the Pritha who played bows-and-arrows

' Be blessed, my daughter A Kshatriya breaks but does not bend Shurasena's daughter should be that kind of Kshatriya But don't stay here because "

"Why?"

"Because there isn't a single lady in this palace You will have to take the responsibility of running the whole palace An inexperienced, young girl like you won't be able to manage it "

"I will manage it From today this palace is my palace, people in it my people "

"Still, you will feel awkward whenever I address you as Pritha You will always recall Mathura You will always feel a little sad and alone in this huge edifice That is why I have decided "

He was on the verge of saying something, but he adroitly stopped himself

"What have you decided?" I asked curiously

"Perhaps if I didn't call you Pritha " He stopped again

"If not Pritha, what then, father?"

"Kunti I wanted to call you Kunti, on the basis of my name, but may be you don't like it Go inside "

I peered inside the tunnel A bat shrieked and fluttered inside, trying to escape but, not finding the way, it hit three or four times against the wall of the passage, and then sped out of one of the light outlets at the top A strange thought struck me then, watching the bat's flutterings, that life itself was like a bird struggling to escape from the tunnel of this world Instantly I turned the stone hook to the left The opening closed My mind was at peace

7

One day I, Dhatri and father were sitting, chatting An army courier dashed inside, huffing and puffing, and blurted, "Maharaja, a contingent of Nishadhas is marching from the east to attack Bhojpura "

"Are you in your senses? Rush immediately to the generals and tell them to sound the conches and war-drums The enemy must be stopped on the other side of the Charmanvati As long as Kuntibhoja rules in Bhojpura, our kingdom will remain free Go!" Father rose and, with an imposing leonine gait, strode towards the armoury In his veins flowed the blood of the unvanquished Bhoja dynasty

After a little while he emerged, in warrior regalia All over the city drums, kettledrums and conches were heard Father's face shone with an eerie glow The Bhojpura army was alerted, and victory shouts of the Bhojas could be heard in all parts of the city Brave warriors prepared themselves for death on the field in the cause of freedom

I asked Dhatri to get the five fold *arati* ready, to perform the ritual for the Maharaja on the eve of battle She brought the *arati* just as father was stepping out I called from the door of the palace, 'Father, wait! Let me perform the *arati* for you "

Without turning, he replied, "Child, a Kshatriya never looks back once he has stepped ahead When I return victorious, you can perform the *arati* Till then, keep the *arati* lit before the family deity in the temple " He took the Garuda-symbolled flag in his hand, stepped steadily forward, mounted the chariot, and disappeared in a flash

"Victory to Maharaja Kuntibhoja!' Shouts on all sides The Bhojpura army, hearts pounding, ran to rout the Nishadhas A cloud of dust spiralled into the distance and in a short time disappeared in the Ashva river

The citizens shouted in the intoxication of triumph "Victory to Maharaja Kuntibhoja!"

"Victory to Princess Kunti Devi!"

Chest swelling with pride, father stepped through the main door A piercing, thunder-crackling voice rant even the inner rooms of the palace—a scream that seemed to shiver through the stone ramparts

"King, have you become so mad with success that you don't have eyes for the guest waiting at your palace?"

The eyes of the citizens turned in the direction of the voice All at once the entire place seemed to shake with fear

We turned towards the voice A long-bearded, matted-haired, emaciated, tall, darkish rishi To him the world must have appeared as a bundle of grass, which could be flicked over as he wished with the *balva*-stick he carried in his hand It seemed as if he had fiercely knotted the entire universe in the curve of his eye-brows Whirling the shining *kamandala*-pot in the air, he seemed to spout fire from his eyes

The citizens started murmuring among themselves Father quickly stepped forward and prostrated himself at the holy man's feet

The rishi thundered again, "Kuntibhoja, what are all these war-noises for? Why all this blowing of bugles?"

"Forgive me, Guru-deva I have just returned from battle I had no inkling of your arrival, or " Father said imploringly, his head still at the rishi's feet Straight-as-an-*ashoka* father of a little while ago now lay flat and faded as grass Proud-as-the-raised-hood-of-a-snake father of a little while ago was now as timid as a squirrel

"Am I one of your horde of servants that I have to inform you of my arrival? Have you forgotten that I am a free rishi who moves wherever he wishes in this world? Or have you the gumption to think that this whole world is like a maidservant under your feet?" He raised his eyebrows and thundered

All felt as if a thunderbolt had crashed on their heads

"I crave forgiveness If only I had known that you were coming " Father rose unsteadily to his feet

"Welcome and respect and insult are for rajas like you I don't need them "

"Please forgive me," father said meekly, with folded palms

"Very well, king Come "

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief

Dhatri advised me to step forward and *namaskara* him I did so, slowly

"Who's this, king?" he questioned father

"My daughter Kunti "

"Your daughter? King, do you know who you are talking to?" He asked this sarcastic question, rolling his eyes

"No, Guru-deva, forgive me She is Raja Shurasena's daughter Pritha My adopted daughter Kunti " What was the matter with father today? Why was he always bending his head and *namaskara-ing* that rishi like grass cringing under the onslaught of rain?

"King, I haven't come here to be entertained I have come to perform a *maha yajna* in Bhojpura, in your palace My inner voice has instructed me to do so '

'Your servant is ready to serve," father said, bowing

"This massive sacrifice is not a simple affair, king With this *yajna* I plan to bring under my control the five elements that constitute this earth I will, with this yajna, make my slaves the shaktis that energise the entire cosmos Understood? If this *yajna* is marred in any way ' He looked around

'No, Gurudeva I and Kunti will see to it that nothing is lacking "

Keep this well in mind, Kuntibhoja This is the first time such a *yajna* is being performed in all Aryavarta As preparation for it, I have done severe *tapasya* for forty years in the Himalayas and attained a divine mind-shakti "

I am fortunate, Guru deva Please enter the palace "

'Why the palace? Where excessive indulgence is, is death of the soul I will stay in a thatched hut, in front of your palace "

"As you command And Kunti will be at your service "

The rishi placed his foot inside the main door of the palace The people present shouted "Victory to Maha rishi Durvasas!"

Instantly Durvasas turned and spoke out loudly, "Whose victory are you celebrating? Go shout in the fields— that's better At least you'll frighten away the grain- eating birds Off with you! King, I won't stand any such nonsense I want total peace "

Such was the rishi Durvasas, the son of Maha-rishi Atri, the son of the dedicated lady Anasuya, the brother of the raja-of-yogis Dattatreya, the Durvasas who could pack more anger in his mendicant's bowl, the *kamandala*, than the irascibility of all the hot-tempered rishis of Aryavarta

9

A thatched hut was constructed opposite the palace A weird spectacle—a leaf-hut facing a luxurious edifice Whoever visited the palace gazed in surprise at the hut Rishi Durvasas'deep mantra-chanting "Om bhur bhuvah svaha " replaced the marching tramp of the army At the brahma-muhurta, before the crack of dawn, Maha-rishi Durvasas would rise and bathe in the Ashva river, and sit down, facing the east, for his mantra-meditation Then he would place various kinds of sacrificial fuel in the *yajna*-pit The smoke made the eyes of everyone in the palace water

Maha-rishi Durvasas! How harsh and confusing was his behaviour! He wanted to obtain control over the Supreme Power which had created the universe! He wanted to enslave the five primal elements! No one knew how to describe his psychology One instant he was a little boy demanding milk from me, and sometimes he would eat nothing for days together One instant he would clamour for some hard-to-get sacrificial wood, and at others he would scream incessantly at me, and there were also occasions when he would not say a word for two whole days

And father had entrusted me with the charge of looking after such a rishi He had warned me that, no matter how impossible he became and however much he ranted, I was not to answer back I was never to show the least disinterest or displeasure I was to ensure that nothing was lacking in serving him There were times when he became intolerable, and at other times he would order me to wash his feet I had to do such an amazing variety of work for him that my body seemed to ache and crack all over My mind seemed to wilt But I endured all, in order to please father Washed feet had to be re-washed I wanted at times to burn the thatched hut until only ashes remained, and set off straight to Mathura I started having doubts whether I would myself not go mad by living so close to this bewildering rishi

Not one month, not two months—I suffered all this whimsical conduct for ten months Each night I would wake and sit up at midnight because the puja materials of the rishi had to be readied before dawn Sleeplessness made my eyes red I grew weak Seeing my condition, Dhatri cursed Durvasas

Towards the final days, Maha-rishi Durvasas stopped even coming out of the thatched hut He did not speak one word during

the last two months His only diet consisted of milk and fruits Instead of sleeping, he would chant mantras at night His nocturnal vigil made me uneasy What if, instead of he controlling the primal shaktis, he became controlled by them? What was he achieving by this *yajna*? What would this rishi do by enslaving the elements? Could a human survive their resplendent power? My mind was troubled all days by countless questions like these It was not possible even to meet a few people off and on, because there was no knowing when he would summon me from the midst of the thatched hut Nor had I any idea of what his next demand was going to be

One full-moon night, I fell asleep worrying about all this Deep sleep At dawn I was woken by a loud voice It was Rishi Durvasas shouting continually from the thatched hut Though nourished only on milk and fruits, his voice was more vociferous than the crackle of lightning

He was shouting happily, "Kuntibho-oja! O Kuntibho-o-oja !"

I rose, alarmed, and went in He opened his eyes I couldn't look into them They were two intensely flaming balls Seeing me, his mouth broke into a faint smile, and he said in a booming voice, "You will today get the fruits of serving me, Kunti From today the entire world will see you as the mother of heroes Come, sit here " I remained standing He roared, "Sit!"

I sat down beside the *yajna* altar I couldn't make out what he was saying

He went on, "Kunti, with the threads of my mantras I have today yoked the five elements of the universe as one yokes horses to a chariot My dedication has succeeded Here, sip this holy water "

"But I " My mind filled with fear

"Kunti, do you know who you are facing!" His eyes seemed to shower sparks Was he trying to burn me to ashes?

I quietly took the holy water, while he rattled off mantras whose words I had never heard before, but they entered the whorls of my ears and registered themselves clearly inside I felt strangely elated They were like waves of nectar My body felt incredibly light. For a moment I felt as if I had myself become a word too In front of my eyes a solid circular refulgence appeared

Mantra chanting over, Durvasas stood up, like a triumphant warrior Placing his hand on my head, he said, "Kunti, there will be no lady like you in the whole of Aryavarta Whichever shakti you think of while chanting this mantra—that shakti will appear before

you in human form in an instant and fulfil your desire like a slave, and leave after filling your womb with a son as refulgent as himself. This is Durvasas' word. Keep it well in mind. You can go."

Without waiting for my reply, without waiting to meet father, he left the thatched hut as he had come, swinging his *kamandala*-pot, like a majestic musth elephant—and disappeared from sight, in the direction of the north, outisde the palace.

Gusts of wind scattered the ashes of the *yajna* fire-pit inside the thatched hut. A buffeting gust upturned the tiger-skin on which Durvasas had sat.

10

Maha-rishi Durvasas departed, and the palace reverted to its palatial glory. Dhatri breathed a sigh of relief. A burden was eased off father's chest. That Rishi Durvasas before leaving had given me a mantra capable of cursing as well as summoning gods—no one knew about this.

The attendants of the palace completely forgot about Durvasas, as if he was a stray cloud that had drifted across the palace. But his words continued to sing in my ears: "You will be the mother of heroes." They embarrassed me. There were days when I kept completely silent. The words of the mantra rang clearly in my ears, and I wanted urgently to invoke them. It was with the greatest difficulty that I controlled myself. Those words stuck to me like ticks on a dog. Because of my inner turmoil, I sometimes made hilarious blunders in my daily activities, by addressing servants and maids with respectful honorifics such as "Aji". They would stare at me in astonishment. I would quickly correct myself. And so the days passed. The compassionate favours of spring visited the city. Bhojpura burst into a variegated riot of floral colours. Their fragrance sweetened the atmosphere.

Spring! Spring is the reflection on earth of the last rainbow of the rainy season. Spring is the Seven-Sages Constellation—the Great Bear itself—descending on earth in the form of birds singing flute-like melodies in the seven notes of the scale. Spring is the dimples on the cheeks of baby-earth created by the tickling fingers of the monsoon. In one's youth there is naturally a deep attraction to spring. I would always stand on the parapet of the palace and delight in the spectacle of floral vernal beauty.

One day, a rest day, I was relaxing in this manner on the parapet at dawn The rippling lyricism of the Ashva river wafted up to me on the breeze The city was slowly waking up Cowbells tinkled softly Birds chirrupped Slowly the east came into sight, and the Sun-God gradually climbed up the eastern horizon His touch brought life into every being A thrill shot through my body Little by little that radiance rose to his full height in the eastern sky What magnificent effulgence! His countless rays illuminated every nook and corner of the earth! A strange idea flashed in my mind If I were as immense as the earth, I too would be filled with the multi-rayed glory Just as boiling water bubbles furiously, the words of the mantra began circulating in my mind I felt as if my whole body had been transformd into the mantra itself The calf of my curiosity jerked at its neck-rope of self-control What will these mantras bring? Will the Sun-God come to me if I think of him? How could that possibly be? Let me see whether there's really any strength at all in these mantras Rishi Durvasa kept insisting on the single-minded dedication of sadhana—let me test that sadhana today I closed my eyes For an instant I thought of that radiant shakti Folding my palms in prayer, I started chanting the mantra Each word lightened my body My consciousness waned The words of the mantra emerged from my mouth with a unique power My body's awareness began fading Even control over my mind vanished All objects became invisible I am Kunti, I am standing on the parapet, I am chanting the mantra—all bonds involved with these statements shattered I became a ray of radiance itself, a ray that saw nothing else I saw a fiercely radiant, powerful, lustrous male form approaching from the east His ears sported light-emitting celestial ear-rings His golden locks shone From his eyes shot brilliant rays of light He was surrounded by an extraordinary dazzle His striking gait burned away the kingdom of darkness He strode towards the parapet, scattering unbearable spark-like rays in the ten directions That refulgent male touched my body-radiance My radiance throbbed She trembled, as if to repulse the refulgence Both communicated in a mysterious language But my radiance had no say That sky-male pierced my radiance and disappeared A magnificent congress of radiances had occurred

Each pore of my flesh, heated, seemed to tingle Very gradually I returned to the world of consciousness, but my heated body had become unbearable even for me In front of my eyes waves of light

moved to and fro My legs seemed to collapse under me "If I remain standing, I will fall off this parapet"—this thought made me instantly sit down I felt a hand on my back A hand that was instantly removed I turned and saw—it was Dhatri, gazing at me, stupefied Eyes agog, she said, "Princess, you are burning with fever Come, let me give you some medicine "

I descended from the parapet Going down, I felt as if I was descending from some high heaven to the earth or to the kingdom of Patala below the earth

11

The feelings and experiences I had from that day on defied the imagination I was surprised at myself, behaving the way I did I hadn t the least desire to speak to anyone Always, in front of my eyes, were these circular waves of light I would go again and again to the thatched hut of Rishi Durvasas and sit there all by myself, for no apparent reason

My behaviour appeared odd to the menials of the palace They tried to divert me in all kinds of ways But I was always in a high state of transported imaginings For no reason I would get an urge to sit in the sunlight I would stand often on the parapet gazing at the sun The sun would climb up above my head and go behind Till his rays warmed my back, I refused to leave More than half of each day passed like this At night I would gaze from my room at the countless twinkling stars, and feel like plucking the stellar flowers of the sky I was intensely attracted to whatever scintillated or radiated light My body glowed golden

Many days passed in this remarkable state Great changes were taking place in my body One day, I was strolling casually in the palace when a maid presented me a golden champak I smelt it just as Dhatri entered While I was talking with her, the flower slipped from my fingers I stooped to pick it up My body felt so heavy It was with the greatest effort that I retrieved the flower and re smelt its fragrance

Dhatri gazed at me with a strange look She was old, and her forehead was corrugated with wrinkles An added wrinkle appeared It seemed to me that she was keenly appraising my whole body with her sharp experienced eyes She raised her brows and said Rajkumari, my experience never fails me Do I have your permission to ask you something?"

"Dhatri," I countered, "have you ever till now asked my permission to ask me anything?"

"No. But, Rajkumari, this question will not please you. You will immediately declare this old maid mad, and order her whipped and exiled to the wilds of the Vindhya mountains."

"Dhatri, you are the oldest and the most trusted of the palace maids. I haven't ever forgotten that. Ask whatever you like."

Her old, wise gaze re-appraised my figure. Her neck trembled as she asked, "Princess, are you expecting?"

"Dhatri, have you any idea who you are speaking to?" I shouted at her. I felt as if a snake was slithering over my body.

"Princess, my hair is all grey. I have served three generations in this palace. Have a good look at yourself in the mirror." Shaking her head, she moved out of my room.

Mother! These two syllables pounded at my heart like heartless warriors. I felt the room whirling around me. How I wanted the earth to open and swallow me up. My heart, like a helpless bird, struck against the walls of my flesh-tunnel.

I was going to be a mother. An unwed mother. Motherhood is the greatest gift to a woman. But wasn't this gift to me like a curse? Rishi Durvasas' promise rang in my ears, "You will be a mother of heroes." His mantra's synoptic essence boomed in my ears—"Om !" The next instant I heard in my heart father's words, "Heroes must live for the joy of victory, and heroic ladies must be prepared to die for the sake of their virtue." Virtue! The precious wealth of a woman. Virtue, the breath of life itself to a woman of Aryavarta!

A *chandola* baby bird began its insistent chirping in the garden—"chrrr-chrrr".

The words that father had said to me when he brought me from Mathura and when he left me here rang out a hundredfold: "You are a Kshatriya king's daughter. Never forget that."

'Kshatriya daughter! ... Virtue! ... The words fell in torrents. Their sounds danced. Virtue!... Kshatriya daughter! I shut my ears with my palms and shouted, "Dhatri! wait !"

She returned. Eyes closed, I said to her, "Dhatri, I, Princess Kunti, order you this—before evening falls, get me the most virulent poison in the world."

There was no other way out for me.

"Rajkumari..." Like the trembling of a vina string.

"Go. This is a royal command," I said sternly.

But..."

"Dhatri, a maid's duty is to carry out orders, not give advice. Go!"

Head bowed, she went out of the palace.

12

Dhatri never came to my room after that. Her aging will lacked the courage to fetch poison for her princess. I sent her many messages, but she put them off on various pretexts of work. I felt as if I was a mouth-watering morsel which Time was about to devour, as it approached, licking its lips with hundreds of tongues. I stopped going out of the palace altogether.

One wish fixed itself stubbornly in my mind—Death. There was no other path than death to bring eternal peace to the pain that afflicted and tortured me. Death! The ender of death-like mental agonies. Death which freed a person of mortal involvements and took him to the endless realm of the unknown. Death which smoothly swallowed up with its black tongue all the black details of life. What other help is there but death for the suffocating condition of the mind? True, everyone respected Princess Kunti. They took to heart every single word she said, but... but what would they think tomorrow of the Kunti the unwed mother? They would spit at her and brand her immoral, throw stones at her, and insult her in public. Really, how weird people are! They never tire of singing the praises of motherhood. All creatures take their birth from a mother's womb, and it is natural that they should sing a mother's praises, but there are times when they fix the royal seal of vice on motherhood. They tear apart this same motherhood with the daggers of social stigma. I was going to be an unwed mother. How was society going to welcome this fact? My son was the fruit of a mantra— would society ever accept such a burning truth? Even if Durvasas came personally and announced this from the crossroads of the city, nobody would believe him. Why did Durvasas come to this city at all? What did he get by playing this fearful trick with my life? How was I connected with his terrifying purpose? But saying all this wasn't going to get me out of my problem. Where do all life's problems get resolved? Don't innocent people suffer for the misdeeds of the guilty? And wasn't I one of them? These countless

questioning mynahs pecked incessantly at my already wounded snake-mind Helpless, it kept writhing and hissing "Death! Death!"

I rose instantly and clapped my hands A maid appeared I said, "Go right now, and get the royal physician, immediately."

She left In a short time, the physician stood before me. He bowed and said, "Command me, Princess "

"Vaidya-raj, the concluding ceremony of Rishi Durvasas' *yajna* remains to be done For the final ritual offering in the sacred fire the world's most virulent poison is required See that this poison is sent immediately with this maid "

Mention of Rishi Durvasas' name made the physician keep silent. He did not ask any clarification, because he knew that Rishi Durvasas was in the habit of asking for the most impossible ingredients at any time

"As you command," he said, and left

In a short time, the maid returned with the poison in a phial I breathed freely I would no more have to face the gaze of scorn and condemnation I stored the phial away safely That phial would put an end to my mortifying agony

13

That night, in the stillness, I stole out of bed, and picked up the phial from the corner I *pranama-ed* in memory my father in Mathura and, closing my eyes, said softly, "Pita-ji, your Pritha is a Kshatriya raja's daughter She will never forget that I know you will approve this decision of mine " Next I mentally *pranama-ed* my father in Bhojpura and whispered, "A Kshatriya girl should be ready to sacrifice her life for her virtue I am going to prove this truth today Bless me, father, and give me strength "

I opened my eyes briefly A death-like silence prevailed. I too will be equally silent in a short time. I would never be able to see this cruel yet desirable world any more—I wavered as I thought this, and my heart choked with feeling But I checked myself. Remembering mother, I whispered, "Mata, your Pritha was born to suffer a hundred thousand pains—and today all these will end Bless me."

I closed my eyes, swallowed the poison, and flung myself on the bed. At dawn the city would break into lamentation

14

I had drunk the poison, but but it had no effect whatsoever Death doesn't come when one wants it to I had thought that a massive fire would blaze through my womb, but nothing happened other than a slight irritation in my throat I waited a while on my bed, but nothing happened True, my extreme mental anguish had brought on a feeling of lethargy I sat up with a jerk Fear made my body shudder Who was I? An unpoisonable being?

Doubts gripped my mind My life had become intolerable Death had become impossible Poison was ineffectual Who was I?

I opened the door, came out of the room, and went to the maids' quarters The maids were all asleep In one corner there was Dhatri, all curled up, fast asleep I shook her awake

She startled, seeing me I dragged her by the arm to my room I desperately needed someone to help me I explained every detail to her Shaking her by her shoulders, I asked, "Dhatri, you tell me, where do I go now? What do I do now? I can't even die "

She ran her rough hand lovingly on my back and said, "Rajkumari, be strong But please on no account go out of the palace, as you did now Make sure no one sees you in this condition "

15

From that day Dhatri stayed in my palace She would not allow anyone to enter the palace Day after day passed My body blossomed like the beauty of the full moon, but my mind was obscured by worry like the moon in eclipse Each day appeared to me like a yuga

Autumn had just ended, but nevertheless one night was completely overcast A howling storm battered the palace on all sides Blinding rain fell

I felt an acute pain in my stomach at dead of night I tossed on the bed in unbearable pain The feather-pillows were roughed up by my writhing Numerous needles of agony tore through the fabric of my flesh Dhatri's wizened eyes showed unmistakeable traces of fear Outside, lightning crackled and the storm growled I was crying with unendurable labour pains

After some time I heard the wail of a baby A wail heard in that palace after more than sixty years But it was drowned by the rumbling thunder outside, and none heard it I was a mother Motherhood! A woman's supreme ornament The gold that emerges from the fire of childbirth Nature's most auspicious gift I looked at the little child with great curiosity Pavonian feathers of ecstasy softly stroked my mind How sight-pleasing he was—like the new-born sun

Seeing me, he stopped wailing He gazed straight at me with his beady baby-eyes Two flesh ear-rings, emitting a soft-blue light, hung from his ears Curiously I felt them they were like the softest *gurhal* flower-buds His utterly soft and pretty body was golden-coloured His golden, curly, thick locks swayed in the gentlest breeze His round, bowl-like face shone with a lustrous nimbus He was sucking his right toe He kept blinking his blue baby eyes and looking at me repeatedly A breeze blew in, and he gurgled with joy His tresses shook A darling dimple appeared on either cheek Seeing him, I forgot entirely that I was a princess, a Kshatriya daughter, and that he was born out of wedlock Passionately, I took him in my arms from Dhatri, and kissed him again and again He clung to me I was indeed blessed My body thrilled For an instant I felt that motherhood was a woman's only salvation

Physical contact with him swelled my breasts with milk I placed him in my lap to breast-feed him As I wrapped my *anchal* around him, Dhatri grasped my hand In a suppressed voice, she whispered in my ear, "Rajkumari, there's no time to lose We have to leave the palace while the lightning flashes "

"Where? Why?" I asked, alarmed

"You can't keep him with you "

"So?"

"You—you'll have to give him up "

"What are you saying, Dhatri! Are you advising a mother to forsake her new-born babe? *Arri*, just look at him! What crime has *this innocent one committed?*"

"Rajkumari, I know everything—but will you be able to convince the people of the city?"

"No, Dhatri, I'll give up life itself, but I won't give up my baby I'm no one's princes, I'm no one's daughter, I'm just the mother of this darling boy, that's all I'm a mother, that's all "

"Rajkumari, don't lose your commonsense in the joy of motherhood. What's going to happen when the Maharaja discovers the truth tomorrow? I can't even think of it. Perhaps... perhaps..."

"Perhaps what?"

"He'll drive you out of the palace. You'll be branded a harlot and condemned and torn to pieces. The gates of Mathura will be closed to you forever."

"What should I do then? Where shall I go, Dhatri?" I sobbed, perplexed.

"Have patience, Rajkumari. What alternative have you except to abandon him? His welfare—and yours—depends on it."

"Abandon? How? Am I a mother or a murderess?"

"Quick, please! Before his wails reach anyone's ears, we should be out of the palace."

"Dhatri, you're so cruel. Advising a mother to strangle her son." I felt a revulsion for her.

"Princess, I have to save a princess' neck. If you hate my advice so much, then keep sitting here—and brooding. I'm leaving. But if the Maharaja ever gets a glimpse of this baby, then—" She made a move to leave.

My mind tossed in the dilemma of spontaneous love and social behaviour, of feeling and duty, of maternal love and illegitimacy. It was an all too real problem—what should I do? For an instant I wanted to take the baby and go far away somewhere. But what place could I go to? Who would give me shelter? Where could a woman with a baby find succour in this terrifying world? And supposing she did go begging door to door, what assurance was there of her safety? And how could she really abandon her baby? With what hands could she push him away from her? Society! Look at the kinds of people that make up society! Where does society get all its sanctions? Isn't society's authority just a parasitic growth on what it calls propriety? Doesn't society make its own arbitrary norms of what is right and what is wrong? God knows how many helpless women, in order to escape these cruel customs, have perished in rivers and wells. Should I do the same? No, no. This baby is so divine looking. He should live. He should be saved at all costs. What to do? What to do?

I called after Dhatri. "Dhatri, don't leave. I'll faint if you do." I agonised in mental and physical pain.

She returned, caressed my back, and said, "Rajkumari, this is the only decision a Kshatriya lady can take. Give him to me." She advanced and took the baby from my lap. He was holding on tightly to my *anchal* with his tiny clenched fist. She ruthlessly pulled his fist away. My heart rose in complaint. Taking him, she walked out.

Soon she returned with a small wooden chest on her shoulders, and placed it on the bed. The baby was not in her arms. I asked her worriedly, "Where have you kept the baby, Dhatri?" Instead of replying, she opened the chest lid. The baby was sound asleep inside, on a tidy little bedding. On all sides, she had placed expensive ornaments. But his complexion was such as to put all the jewellery to shame. She had sealed the joints of the chest with wax. The lid had a small hole in it. But why had she put the baby in the chest? Alarmed, I asked her, "Dhatri, why have you placed him inside the chest? What are you up to now?"

"Rajkumari, before dawn breaks this chest should be floated down the Ashva river. No one is so broadminded as the river, only the river will accept this baby."

"Dhatri—Dhatri! Am I a princess or a witch? Did God forget to teach you how to love a son?"

"Rajkumari, I have eight sons in this palace working day and night in your service. Don't weaken. Hurry!"

Her words pierced my heart like arrows, but—but what would I have to face in the morning? Palace or rubbish heap? I was tied to my topsy turvy thoughts like a sacrificial animal tied to a stake. I wanted to pick up my child, kick Dhatri, and go anywhere my feet led me—but, after all, it wasn't her fault really. Though just a woman, she was doing such a lot for her princess. What satisfaction was she getting out of all this? Whose fault was it then? Mine? Durvasas'? The unknowing new born baby's? Or Time's, which rides humans as if they were horses? Circumstances'? Society's?

It seemed to me that all these thoughts would make my head explode. I was exasperated with my insufferable existence. Was the Creator determined to make a useless wretch out of a princess today? Were circumstances going to make a murderess out of a mother? In desperation I banged my head against the palace wall. Blood gushed out of my forehead. Dhatri pulled me back. Wiping my head with her dress, she said, "Princess, your blood isn't meant to paint walls. It is meant to produce heroes. I swear this to you by this blood itself. Please, not one word more. Come with me, patiently."

I stuffed my *anchal* in my mouth and started crying Dhatri lifted the chest and stepped ahead The entire city was slumbering in the sweet sleep of dawn The storm had abated

She approached the room with the secret tunnel, and moved the stone handle to the right The passage door swung open She climbed down the steps I recalled the fluttering bat I had seen earlier My heart felt heavy Life is a fearful tunnel, a fearful tunnel And today it was required of me to step inside that tunnel excavated for the protection of the ladies of the palace Today I was making use of it for my own protection, but in such a different way, such a terrifying way

Emerging from the tunnel, we saw the Ashva river The recent rains had swollen her noisy fast-flowing waters Seeing the reddish, turbid liquid, my heart started palpitating Was I expected to leave my poor baby to the mercy of these turbulent waves? Was I expected to throw into these foaming torrents an infant who knew only how to wail when hungry and nothing else? What if the chest sank? What lurked in this watery womb? Huge-jawed fish, ravenous crocodiles

Dhatri stepped forward and placed the chest on the flowing waters It bobbed away into the distance The cry of my womb escaped through my lips, "My child! My darling little one!" Saying which, I tried to slip into the river But Dhatri reached out and held me back I struggled to break free, but she seemed to possess superhuman strength Careless of her own safety, she held on to me, clinging like a leech, tightly The bobbing casket disappeared Exhausted and bruised, I sobbed on Dhatri's shoulder She caressed my back She helped me walk back to the palace

Near the river bank a white cow and her calf were drinking water Seeing them, I closed my eyes

The sight of that motherly love made me feel hollow

Today a mother had succumbed to circumstances Today had witnessed the birth of a truth which would make Kunti's life forever empty From today Kunti, though living, was as if dead

The instant I entered my room, I flung myself on the bed Feebly I said to Dhatri, "Summon all the clever fisher- folk and enquire who has found the chest Leave me, and go this very moment Go! I want to be alone " I buried my face in the feather-pillow The bed was warm, but it felt cold as ice to me, like the waters of the Ashva river I sobbed quietly, for fear the truth might get discovered Guiltless

Pritha thrashed right and left in choking agony, Because of the rain, the large leaves of the kadamba tree beat like cymbals krrrr-krrrr

16

That whole day I wept The gentle-hearted Pritha who had so stubbornly tried to restore the baby-bird to its nest was the same girl who had today abandoned her own baby Where will the baby go? Who will find him? Or will he float away to the ocean? Supposing he really did float away My mind was tortured by many doubts I hadn't the strength even to lift my head I hadn't the courage to face anyone

Someone came to the palace in the evening and lit the lamps A little later a person entered and caressed my back I imagined it was Dhatri, and so I shouted, "Go away, Dhatri!" I didn't want her even to touch me

Child look up I startled It was father He stood a dim figure in the light of the lamp Because Dhatri wasn't outside my door, he had walked straight in I wiped my eyes and looked at him My heart was numb with fear Had he discovered everything? Couldn't Dhatri hold a secret even for a day? Who knows what a tongue-lashing I will get now Would my future remain forever darkened, in spite of my heartless action?

Caressing my back, he said serenely, "Kunti, I have a letter today from your father, from Mathura He is planning a *svayamvara* for you His heart is set on it "

I breathed freely Thinking *I have to say something*, I said, "Whatever he wishes, and whatever you order "

"I know memories of Mathura burden you Now your mind will be lightened Soon you will meet your father and mother Wipe your eyes Don't feel sad "

He knew nothing I couldn't make out what he was saying

17

Preparations began for the *svayamvara* I had told father, "Whatever you order " He interpreted that to mean that I was agreeable and he made plans accordingly My mind tossed restlessly Like a shikari pursuing a deer, weird thoughts started pursuing me

Was it not possible that, while I waited with the *svayamvara*

garland in hand, a snake was slithering inside the chest through the aperture in the cover and tightly coiling itself round my little one's neck? Could it be that, while I stood on the sacred wedding dais, the chest might be sinking in the river morass at that very moment? Or it could even be that, while music was being played and sanctified rice scattered on my head, the chest was striking against a rock, its lid flung open—and eagles and vultures swooping down, pecking at my baby's head, and turning that radiant lamp into a blood stained blob of flesh? I listening to the auspicious wedding incantations—and my little darling hearing the cruel death-song of the wind whipped waves! My mind thrashed about like a fish flapping in a net. The more I thought, the more it got entangled. I buried my face in the pillow and sobbed. His sweet, chubby face, his curly golden locks, and his exquisite flesh ear-rings danced before my eyes all day. My mind's turmoil made me shut my eyes.

18

My *svayamvara* invitation was despatched to all the monarchs of the neighbouring territories. It was the talk of the town. I felt sorry for myself. From Pritha I had changed to Kunti, from Kunti I had changed into a mother, and now I was an unmarried girl again, ready for my *svayamvara*. Was there any girl in the world whom the Creator had so mercilessly toyed with? There was no one to reply to this question. I did not want this *svayamvara*—if I dared say this out loud, they would surely have cross-examined me half-dead with volleys of questions. As if a woman is no better than a cow tethered with the rope of customs in the cow-shed of society! So many things happen against her wishes, but she is never free to speak out openly against them, as if she is born simply to suffer with skyey patience the crores of sorrows that become her lot.

The day of the *svayamvara* drew near. A high tide rose and swelled the ocean-enthusiasm of the citizens. Their princess' *svayamvara*! They were soon to be treated to a magnificent display of wedding lavishness. I hadn't been able to suckle my baby once yet. Kunti now had to live a double life: a private Kunti and a public Kunti, a princess and a broken hearted mother. Between these two, it was I who suffered a daily diminution. Royal ladies have royally large sorrows, and no choice but to follow the demands of family and fame.

19

Dreams are memory's offspring. All manner of dreams were mine at night. Sometimes I heard the piteous chirp of an open-beaked *chandola* baby bird. Sometimes I saw a milch cow, mooing near the riverside, and her healthy calf, thick tail uplifted, frisking behind her.

Once I had a horrendous nightmare. The bobbing chest had got embedded in a rocky embankment of the river. The baby inside was wailing with hunger, and there was no one around to affectionately pick him up. When the waves rocked the chest, he thought someone had come to pick him up, he impatiently kicked his legs and flailed his arms. Exhausted with crying, sick with hunger, and thrashing his tiny legs and arms, he gave a fearful hiccup and became silent for ever... No, not for ever... A little later, his near-lifeless body trembled lightly, strangely, little by little his golden limbs increased in golden lustre and seemed to swell. He kicked open the chest's cover. He swelled in size till he became as huge as that Sky-Being. His face throbbed with anger. His flesh-ear-rings became molten hot. His blue eyes had turned red with wrath. He seemed to be running towards me non-stop on the Ashva river. Fists clenched, and angrily biting his lips, he said, "You *rakshasi*! You wicked trampler of the sacred bond of mother and child! You witch who cowers behind the silken cloak of convention! Wait!" He raised his powerful fist to strike my head. I screamed. "Dhatri! Come here—quick!"

She must have been waiting outside the door. Hearing my terrifying scream, she rushed in. Wiping the sweat off my face, she said, agitated, "Princess, you look so frightened! Have you had a nightmare?"

"Dhatri, my little darling boy...?" I couldn't finish the question. How would this maid ever realise my anguish?

"Rajkumari, your baby is safe and well. I was waiting for you to wake up." She said this huskily, stroking my back.

I hurriedly got up, shook her shoulders, and shouted happily, "Where? Who has found him?"

She called a fisherman, who was standing outside, to come in. He entered, bowing. I shot a few questions at him. "Where's the chest? Who found it? Did you pick the baby up?"

"Rajkumari, the chest flowed down the Ashva into the

Charmanvati river From the Charmanvati it drifted to the Yamuna, near Kanpur From the Yamuna it moved to the Ganga in Prayag From Prayag it reached Champanagari in the kingdom of Anga, near Kashi, fifty *yojanas* from Prayag "

"Who found it?"

"A god-like, powerful man A charioteer pulled it out of the water It had floated over a thousand miles "

"Charioteer?"

"Yes, my princess The charioteer's wife took him in her lap Her *anchal* filled with milk The child is safe in their hut Forgive me, Rajkumari, but whose child is he? Which stone-hearted mother pushed him like this to his death?"

"He is the child born of Rishi Durvasas' *maha-yajna* " I threw my pearl necklace to him and added, "Not a word of this must reach anyone "

"Gurudeva Durvasas!" he ejaculated in fright and rushed out with the necklace

My mind was at peace Happily I embraced Dhatri My trickling tears wet her bodice Tears of a princess' helplessness and anguish Tears of joy over the safety of her son, from an anxious mother

Wherever he was, he was safe

20

The day of the *svayamvara* The town teemed with invitees In front of the palace, a magnificent huge pavilion was constructed Father bubbled with joy like a child, moving about and enquiring what was needed where in the pavilion The citizens began decorating the palace Kettledrums, *turais*, vinas, and other instruments started playing Magadha, Koshala, Madra, Chedi, Videha, Kashi and rulers from many other kingdoms turned up for the *svayamvara* From Mathura came my parents to perform the bride bestowal, the *kanya dana* ceremony My brother Vasudeva and my sister Shrutashrava also came After I had left, my father had adopted Vasudeva as his son I was seeing Shrutashrava for the first time After many years was a *swayamvara* being held in the palace, which was the reason for the ubiquitous enthusiasm

Marriage! A memorable turning, where a girl s life stream mingles with a powerful and illustrious male-ocean The stringing of the fragrant flower of a woman's life into the variegated garland of

her in-laws The first real sacrament of a woman's life The new life of an Aryan lady

The *svayamvara* hour The pavilion was packed with invited dignitaries and citizens Father rose, and welcomed all, saying, "Noble rulers of Aryavarta! Pritha, daughter of Mathura's raja Shurasena of the Yadava dynasty, who is my adopted daughter Kunti will now enter the pavilion with the bridal garland, which she will of her own choice place round the neck of the most deserving among the illustrious invited candidates That you have all come here makes me happy and proud As a descendant of the royal Bhoja dynasty, I welcome you No conditions have been laid down in this bridal self-choice My daughter's Kunti's choice is the only condition "

All rose respectfully and acknowledged the welcome Silence swathed the pavilion White-flower marriage garland in my hand, I entered behind the minister A voice called out, "Born-in-the-Yadava clan, reared-in-the-land-of-Mathura, lady-of-all-excellences Princes Kunti Devi!" All the lords of the earth stood up, briefly Father raised his hand They sat down again A lightning thrill shot through my body Today I was going to choose a partner for my journey through life Today's choice would decide my future Suddenly I felt my heartbeat thudding in my ears I slowly made my way through the pavilion, garland in hand, following the minister The minister described each king in the most fulsome terms I sized up each contender sharply from the corner of my eye, rejecting, and proceeding ahead One by one all the seated kings were rejected, and I reached the end of the line, till there was only one left Maharaja Dirgha, the foe tormenting ruler of Magadha The minister extolled him I made a gesture of rejection and moved on Everyone started whispering The long golden rays of the evening sun slanted inside the pavilion The minister whispered fearfully to me, "Princess, this pavilion will now turn into a battle-ground You should have chosen one or the other Why didn't you? '

Father stood up as if to say something In the meantime, a commotion was noticed in the western corner of the pavilion The citizens hurried to one side Behind them entered thousands of horsemen by the main gate of the palace A voice called out, "Absolute-monarch of-Hastinapura Maharaja Pandu of the Kaurava clan!" Carefully holding my garland, I gazed westward A

tall, fair-complexioned, sturdy figure was approaching the pavilion. The rays of the setting sun fell on the figure's back. He had a full, round face. He came like the Sun-God himself, as the saviour of Kunti. As he stepped inside the pavilion, I stepped forward. I placed the marriage garland round the neck of that finest of men. Clapping resounded on all sides. An ecstatic voice shouted, "Maharani Kunti Devi, the jewel of the Kaurava dynasty of Hastinapura—" And all responded, "Victory to her!"

From Rajkumari Kunti I became Maharani Kunti. My heart swam in an ocean of joy. I had become the Queen of the Kauravas whose illustrious flag waved on all Aryavarta. I and the Maharaja approached father for his blessings. Overjoyed, he blessed us, "May the universal glory of the Kaurava dynasty spread through you even to the heaven of the gods!" Of all the unexpected experiences that had come into my life, this was the only one that could give me contentment, because it had happened as a result of my own choosing.

I shed all worries.

21

Eight days later I sat in the chariot that was to take me and the Maharaja to Hastinapura. The whole city turned up to bid us farewell. Father brushed away the tears from his eyes. I took leave of Vasudeva and the others and departed for Hastinapura as a Maharani. I had taken only one woman attendant with me—indispensable Dhatri. My mind throbbed with mixed thoughts. I bid farewell to the city that had decked herself with the *alpana* decorations of my memories. The chariot raced towards Hastinapura, and the city limits fast receded. We approached the Ashva river. The mere sight of the river sent a flood of memories of my pre-marriage life gushing through me, like a solitary spark kindling a huge fire. I seemed to see the two golden flesh-ear-rings on all its ripples. Two sweet little hands appeared. Hands meant to wield the sceptre would now hold whip and reins. The Creator can be very cruel. He brought me here from Mathura, and He could not bear the thought that I had no problems here. He sent Durvasas from the Himalayas to Bhojpura. And now I was going to Hastinapura. But my radiant son was in Champanagari in the thatched hut of a charioteer. I respectfully *pranama-ed* the Ashva river in my son's memory.

Rajkumari Kunti was going as the Maharani of the Kauravas Woman's life—what is it but constant change? Sometimes someone's daughter, someone's wife, or someone's mother—and sometimes someone's daughter-in-law, or someone's sister-in-law She is never herself—never free Or if she is, she dare not show it

22

We reached Hastinapura, the city of Maharani Shakuntala, Suvarna, Yashodhara, Tapati, Shubhangi, Sampriya, Amrita, Suyesha, Satyavati and many other queens All of them had propagated the glory of the Kauravas throughout Aryavarta As soon as I entered the city, I was awe-struck Thousands of citizens had gathered on the bank of the holy Ganga in order to welcome their queen Intoxicated with happiness, they raised welcome shouts, rained flowers, and played instruments Every wave of the Ganga danced in joy to receive the bride of the Kuru dynasty The same Ganga in Champanagari was looking after my little baby So I bowed and *pranama ed* her

We entered the palace with pomp and splendour An *arati* was done for me by the Queen Mother in front of the main door Venerable, father-like Maharaja Bhishma and Dhritarashtra stood nearby I respectfully *pranama ed* them all Blessing me, Vidura said, ' Daughter, today our family has united with Raja Shurasena This augurs well " I was only twenty when I entered the palace as *Maharani—the palace that* was witness to the incomparable valour of the Kauravas I felt as light as a feather Streams of nectarine happiness drenched my head

23

My days passed happily in Hastinapura I wasn't even aware when a day began and when it ended Every day Dhatri would tell me various stories of past heroes and their exploits The butterfly-chasing Pritha of childhood slowly got erased from the tablet of my mind The Kunti of Bhojpura, helplessly battering her head on walls, faded What a powrful force forgetfulness is in human life! Many incidents take place in daily life which, if strung together, are such that they can drive him insane That is why Nature has given man this precious ability to forget

All my memories started slowly fading into oblivion. My mind began stitching with happy needles the fabric of Maharani Kunti's new life. I was contented with my lot. I lacked nothing. Respect, wealth, fame, position—all lay at my feet. I had a handsome, loving, and valorous Maharaja as husband. Every day, while I was having my hair combed, I would ask my reflection in the mirror, "Who are you? Why are you staring so fixedly at Maharani Kunti like this? You'll cast an evil eye on her if you go on like this." But she kept on smiling and staring at me. In mock anger I threw face powder at my double. The powder obscured the mirror and my reflection. I circled the room, and stood near the window. I had a splendid view of the Ganga from there. Seeing the countless *karandava* birds flying carefree over her waters I thought: *Life is a delightful seesaw.*

Once it happened that I was standing near the window for a long time, gazing at the Ganga when I suddenly felt two hands cover my eyes from behind. I was startled. The hands tightened further. It was the Maharaja. I blushed. He pulled me to him and said, "Kunti, when a man becomes famous, a glory-garland starts growing. I have you, of course, but a king has two wives. One is his wife, and the other is the earth he rules. Without the earth, a king is like a lion without a mane."

I listened with bowed head. What magic there was in his lightest touch! My peacock-body spread its feathers and danced. He lifted my chin with his fingers and said lovingly, "Ours is an ancient ancestral kingdom. I intend to make it even more glorious by conquest. I am leaving tomorrow on a mission of world-conquest."

World-conquest! Meaning endless war. One after another, battle with new and mighty kingdoms. A game of life and death. I held his hands tightly in mine. He guessed my fears. He glanced at me and said, "Don't worry, Kunti. There is Kaurava blood in my veins. It has never known defeat. I will return in no time." His eyes flashed self- confidence. He pulled me even closer with his powerful arms. He placed his eager lips on mine. The cool breezes of the Ganga tried fruitlessly to calm the passion of two lovers.

24

The next day the massive, fearless army of the Kauravas marshalled to carry out the plan of world-conquest. The Maharaja, in steel

armour, the dress of a warrior, stepped out to head the assembled soldiers The elders and gurus blessed him The Queen Mother, while blessing him, said, "Pandu, remember to send regularly by special messenger news that all is well Be careful "

I applied saffron tilak on his forehead I bowed, touched his feet, and said gently, "When you return, see that you bring a sweet little wife or two with you "

As I rose, he asked in surprise, "Wife?"

'Yes A king has two wives—one his wife, and the other the earth he's won "

'Very well " He turned and mounted a pure-white horse at the head of the army At a gesture from him, the soldiers began marching The three-cornered flag, like a dove's wings, fluttered and vanished in the east My heart filled with pride

25

Every day a messenger arrived with news The Kauravas conquered kingdom after kingdom, gathering an enormous hoard of gems, pearls, precious stones, gold, cat's-eyes, rubies, silver, cows, horses, and other booty Dasharna, Magadha, Mithila, Videha, Kashi, Suhma, Pundra and many other kingdoms fell before the Kaurava onslaught Four months had passed since the army set out Four months that seemed to me like four years Only a soldier's wife can know the psychology of a woman whose husband is away in the wars

After four months, news came that the all-victorious Maharaja was returning after completing his mission The whole city was agog with enthusiasm After Maharaja Bharata no other monarch had achieved such a successful world conquest My head seemed to swell with pride Father had once said, "A hero should live in the glory of conquests " My mind said, *This glory is material Sometimes even a hero's wife is affected by it* Now I had become the loved wife of the World-Conquering Maharaja Pandu I was the Maharani of Maharanis Truly did someone say It happens sometimes that a man's destiny ocean foams so much that a high-tide is in the offing

Hundreds of booty laden carriages drove up in front of the palace Behind them came the victorious Kaurava army Finally came the Maharaja, in a howdah atop an elephant His chest

swelled But but there was a lovely lady sitting on his left Who? How did she dare to sit next to the Maharaja? The weevil of doubt burrowed into my feminine mind

The howdah approached the main entrance of the palace As always, I stepped forward, but my thoughts were all concentrated on that woman She was beautiful She was laughing I couldn't control myself any longer Finally it was the Maharaja himself who broke the silence "Kunti, remember you asked me to bring a wife with me when I returned? This is Shalya's sister Madri See how much lovelier than you she is!"

Ah, so he had used my own words against me! No woman knows how and when a man turns everything to his advantage And this technique was the traditional practice of this dynasty

At night the army general informed me that the Maharaja Shalya of Madra had, even before the war, taken Grandfather Bhishma's consent for his sister Madri's marriage with Maharaja Pandu He had requested the Maharaja's consent also to this alliance with the illustrious Kuru dynasty And the Maharaja, seeing Madri's beauty, agreed, and brought her back with him

Two Maharanis in the city now—Kunti and Madri

That night I thought before going off to sleep An excess of happiness is not a good thing If a child is very good-looking, an intelligent mother places a black spot on its cheek to ward off the evil eye The same should apply to happiness as well Happiness needs sharing with a partner It needs a black spot to ward off sorrow Good that Maharani Madri turned up Now Kunti will get some time at least to be her own self as a woman The duties of a Maharani will be half Madri's She will keep the Maharaja happy because she is so much more attractive than me

Isn't life after all a compromise?

26

Maharani Madri came as my co wife, true, but we never harboured bitter feelings about each other Jealousy is a two edged sword perilous for the person who feels jealous and also for the person who is the object of the jealousy We were affectionate with each other Affection is the only feeling that always pleases one and all We lived our own lives, but respecting each other

Madri was received with the same warm welcome that I had been

The Maharaja appeared among us like the moon flanked by two stars I was happy to get a companion with whom to discuss my little joys and sorrows Life sometimes plays a whole Holi of happiness with a person, drenching him with colours to upsetting point Then one feels like throwing up one's hands and exclaiming *Enough of this excess of joy, no more, please!* Such was my condition During the Maharaja's absence I would spend hours in idle chatter with Madri She was a delightful conversationalist, with a voice like a flute melody

It happened once when we were deep in gossip She was saying something about the brilliant wit of her illustrious brother Shalya How he had immediately succeeded in winning over the Maharaja with his persuasive ways—and as she recounted this, she lowered her head and chuckled We had no inkling when the Maharaja had entered the room, for he was standing right behind us Advancing silently, he placed his hands on our shoulders, smiled and said, "So it's possible for two swords to be sheathed in one scabbard!"

We rose I said slowly, "Who says a woman is a sword?" Madri seconded me She said, "And who says a man is a scabbard?"

The Maharaja was surprised He asked, "Tell me, then, both of you what is woman and what is man?"

I said, "A man is a body and "

"A woman is his shadow Sometimes, when light falls from two sides, then—then a body throws two shadows We are your two shadows " Madri completed my sentence I gazed dumbfounded at her

He was pleased with Madri's answer He pulled both of us to him with both hands Laughing, he said, "I did not get the joy when I became king, and I did not get the joy when I became world-conqueror, that I have got today And do both of you know what a raja does when overjoyed?"

'He gives charity to the weak and the needy," I replied

'He orders *dharmshalas* and other pilgrims' homes to be built Or he orders roads constructed," added Madri

'Oh no, when a king is happy he does one thing only—go hunting Today we go hunting in the forest of Varanavata '

He despatched an attendant to inform the army general accordingly Preparations for the hunt commenced As the Maharaja strode quickly towards the door, his gold crown entangled with a loose silk thread of the door drape, slipped, and fell A lizard of fear

scuttled in my mind Stepping forward with alacrity and picking up the crown, I said, "Maharaja, not today—could you not cancel it for today?"

"Kunti, women are by nature nervous, men are by nature determined I will go Don't be upset. I'm not going to fight a war It's just a simple hunt "

He placed the crown on his head and strode out

27

Within two days the Maharaja returned from Varanavata, but with nothing to show for his hunt Besides, his generally cheerful countenance had now become morose and preoccupied Could it be that the hunt had been too fatiguing? In the belief that seeing us would revive his spirits, I and Madri smilingly approached him He did not so much as glance at us Head bowed, he went straight to his palace room, and barred the door from inside He remained cooped inside without any food or water for four days Despite repeated knockings, the door was never opened Scorpions of doubt kept stinging us In the end we went helplessly to the Queen Mother What we told her made her pensive She accompanied us immediately and knocked at the door Irritable and harsh sounds were heard from inside "Who is it?"

"Ambalika, your mother Open the door, ' the Queen Mother said imperiously

The door opened instantly In just four days how dramatically had he changed! He had removed his royal garments and was wearing a white dress His head was crown- less His powerful, sky-ranging sharp gaze was now riveted on the ground Was there a world conquering emperor standing before me, or a mendicant?—I couldn't make out

The Queen Mother asked, 'Pandu, I hear you haven't eaten for four days Does being a monarch mean that you can do whatever you like whenever you like? Couldn't you think of these two girls?"

He bowed, *namaskara ed* his mother and said, "Do you think that I am the kind of king who does exactly as he wishes whenever he wishes? I am practising for the kind of life that is going to be mine in the future My behaviour is in accordance with that "

What life-style are you talking about? '

'A sannyasi s," he said with bowed head

"Pandu, are you in your senses? You are a glorious scion of the Kuru dynasty You are a world-conquering emperor You are not a beggar living in leaf-thatched hut"The Queen Mother screamed at him with the virulence of a lightning flash

It seemed as if the sky had fallen on me

"My fate, mother I am no more the scion of the Kuru solar dynasty I am not a world-conquering emperor I am no one's husband, no one's friend I am a toy in the hand of fate " He covered his face with both hands The lips that once ordered servants, now trembled uncontrollably

"Why are you so obsessed with fate? Don't use fate as a cover for your own cowardice, Pandu If you had this in mind all along, why did you have to marry these two lovely girls? Are your wives like a pair of slippers to put on when you please and throw away when you feel like throwing them away?" The Queen Mother said this harshly and worriedly

"No, mother You are Pandu's mother, and you still haven't understood Pandu The tender seed of my life's deepest yearnings has been shrivelled to ashes by a terrifying fiery curse "

' Curse?"

That syllable slithered into my ears like a venomous snake sliding into its hole Darkness clouded my vision Madri slumped in a heap

The Queen Mother advanced and, shaking the Maharaja's shoulders, asked worriedly, "Curse? What curse, Pandu? What kind of curse? Whose? Who cast this curse?"

Lifelessly, in a calm voice, the Maharaja replied, "Four days ago I went hunting in the fotest of Varanavata, but cruel fate hunted me down instead I shot an arrow at a deer coupling with his mate Fatally pierced, the deer collapsed But his cries weren't deer cries He moaned and tossed like a human When I reached him, he flailed his legs wildly He was actually Rishi Kindam, who had by the strength of his penance disguised himself as a deer and was sporting in the lovely forest with his mate As he lay dying in his deer body he cursed me bitterly, In your obsession with the hunt you have snatched a lover from his beloved and sent him to the clutches of death, for which I, Rishi Kindam, place this curse on you—when you clasp your wife in the act of coition, you will die in agony on the spot as I have died "

Covering his face with both hands, the world-conquering emperor of the Kurus whimpered like a child He closed the door

quickly The Queen Mother, sobbing, beat at the door Madri placed her head between her knees and wept I stood petrified Misery, sorrow, anguish, and above all these—numbness

28

The Maharaja summoned me that night

Staring fixedly at the serene Ganga from the window, he said, ' Kunti, I'm renouncing the palace Where excess wealth has full scope to play, self-discipline goes by default Nothing is more precious to a man than his own life I will never be able to practise self-control if I stay here I'm leaving the palace tomorrow and going to the Nagashata mountain "

"But, Maharaja " My heart shook

"Kunti, I know I have not been able to give you anything The Creator has plummeted you down from Himalayan happiness to the drags of despondent reality I would not like you to stay behind and shed tears when I am gone I suggest that you go back to your parents Explain this to Madri also "

"Maharaja, what I wanted to say do listen "

"Kunti, creepers that cling to a massive tree need only one bolt of lightning to send them crashing down This horrible curse has made you no better than such creepers Fate plays the same cruel game with mortals that a cat does with mice Go "

"Maharaja, you must listen to what I have to say A shadow cannot be divorced from the body An Aryan lady cannot live for a moment without her husband Both of us decided last night to accompany you to the forest "

"Don't gamble with fate fruitlessly, Kunti It is as difficult to remain self-controlled in the midst of pulsing temptations as it is to contain the vast sky in a *sindura* box "

"Maharaja, let's assume Time has decided to catch fish in his net of temptations—very well, I can also show him what it means to be the daughter of Raja Shurasena of Mathura I, Kunti, hereby vow that from today you are no more my husband, you are my son my son I will have no other thoughts about you But neither can a mother live apart from her son You will have to take me with you I will not stay back "

"Kunti, don't be sentimental "

"If you won't even permit me this, then you will have to push me into the Ganga, and then only can you go '

"Kunti Kunti, really, even the sky will be ashamed in front of your greatness But why Time gave me such a jewel to place in my cursed crown only God knows " He sobbed, shivering

It doesn't become a scion of the Kurus to weep, Maharaja Even Fate will consider itself blessed if it touches your precious feet," I said determinedly

His grief seemed to abate

That terrible curse had, in one instant, annihilated all the glory of the palace

For four days the Maharaja had carefully pondered the matter before deciding to renounce the palace Who could say if this was the right decision or not? He kept repeating the same thing it was better to be in the forest than to be roused and tempted in a palace's luxurious surroundings Apart from that, wealth pampers a man Man can gamble once with wealth, fame and respectability—but he cannot ever gamble with his life

Forest exile, he thought, was perfect for abstinence I agreed Anyone can slip on the sweet and easy path of luxury Self control needs profound self-awareness, and that was possible only in the forest The three of us decided to go to the forest

29

We shed our royal vesture, and handed over our body ornaments to the Queen Mother We were leaving—who knows how this spread through the whole city, like the air itself Crowds thronged in front of the palace The fact of our departure plunged Maharaja Bhishma and Dhritarashtra in an ocean of sadness The hard eyes of these heroes brimmed with tears The Maharaja's younger brother Vidura tried variously to persuade him out of his decision The Maharaja had only one reply Palace and renunciation do not mix And so it happened that the world conquering beloved raja became a yogi and went to pass his days in the forest The hands that wielded the Kaurava sceptre now would carry the *kamandala* bowl The lips that confidently ordered a victorious army to kill and loot would now be chanting shlokas from the scriptures for his salvation Only fate can hurt a person so intensely and transform his life so dramatically

Wearing a garment washed pure-white, the Maharaja bowed and *namaskara-ed* everyone in final farewell Maharaja Bhishma said, "Pandu, earlier my father's—Raja Shantanu's —brother had similarly renounced his kingdom His name was Devapi But he did so voluntarily But you are having to give up a valorous throne in order to sit on a renouncer's tigerskin—the only reason for that is your ill fortune In the forest you will receive consolation and peace from the Brahman-absorbed atman of Devapi Go Remember well the reason why you are abandoning the throne Restrain your senses So long as Bhishma lives, the fame of the Kauravas is secure Have no worries on that score "

The three of us left the palace Only one citizen accompanied us—Dhatri—as if the Creator had specifically made her to protect Kunti till death No one was able to convince her to stay back The four of us travelled barefoot I had entered the city as a Maharani and I was leaving it as a sannyasini The citizens followed us and periodically fell at our feet, wailing, "Maharaja! Maharani ji! Don't forsake us Don't leave Hastinapura orphaned " But we pretended not to hear We numbed our ears Our minds were deaf We dare not look back, and we could see nothing ahead

Outside the city limits, we approached the Ganga Seeing her, my heart welled up—I remembered Mathura My childhood, beside the Yamuna, in Mathura, innocent and uncomplicated Had childhood's Pritha seen Kunti now, what would she have said? "Prithe, where are you going dressed in white like a crazy girl? Come, let s chase butterflies together " For a second I stood there, still I had no desire to take even one step further Who knows how many generations of Kaurava rule had been witnessed by this same Ganga? And how many victories! But today's incident will be written on the mind of Ganga like a streak of rock She had probably never seen anything like this in her life The wall of my patience shook I covered my face with both hands Unconsciously, my fingers touched my pearl ear-rings It had not struck me to remove them I took them off and flung them into the Ganga s waters A ripple spread ever wideningly A welter of memories sprang up in the lake of my mind Only a year ago I had similarly offered two live-flesh ear-rings to the Ashva river And today, as the final symbols of memories of the Queen Mother's, I was offering my ear rings to the Ganga Kunti was free at last—free outside and inside Her feet would now faithfully tail behind her

husband wherever he took her They would stop nowhere A woman is not born to acquire, but to sacrifice

30

From Hastinapura we proceeded to the mountain of Nagashata in the north—a mountain inhabited by herds of elephants To us, so used to palatial comforts, it seemed that the forest wind was pouncing on us with voracious fury Even herds of elephants were scattered by its ferocity Trumpeting, they rushed past us helter-skelter Somehow or other, we passed a month on that mountain, and then pushed on, with no definite destination in mind except what we decided on the spot We were four individuals single-knotted to each other by obligations passed on from our past lives Seeing the Maharaja going far ahead, Madri would sometimes burst into tears I controlled myself and tried to calm her down also

Leaving Nagasha'a hill we came to the hill called Chaitraratha, where we spent a few days before moving on the Gandhamadana hill On the way were the Himalayas, whose darshan soothed me somewhat Pure-white snow on all sides as if the Creator was flashing rows of white teeth and guffawing at the colourful desceptive world In the Himalayas we met Maharishi Vyasa He was on his way back to Hastinapura after severe *tapasya* He asked, surprised, "*Arre* Pandu, how is it you are here?" The Maharaja recounted the whole story in detail I *pranama ed* him Blessing me, he said, "Kunti, Durvasas' words will come true You will be a mother of heroes " The Maharaja looked at him stupefied Turning to the Maharaja, he added, "Pandu, you do not know who Kunti is No one in the world will get to know about this Well, you can leave now " He went away, softly, like a whiff of air

I was troubled, because I expected the Maharaja to pursue Vyasa's statement It was God's goodness that made him keep silent on the matter at that time

We proceeded from the Himalayas to Gandhamadana hill, camping near the Indradyumna Lake for a few days Crossing the Hansakuta hill, we arrived at the hill known as Shatashringa, where we saw shimmering-blue lakes, lush-green forests, many varieties of fruit-trees, and flocks of deer and rabbits Shatashringa was the blue border of the green garment of the goddess of Nature

Beside one of the lakes on that hill we constructed a thatched hut

We had travelled so far that we had no idea any more in which direction lay Hastinapura In that entire forest there was only one sign of human habitation—our thatched hut And so the world-conquering raja of the Kauravas began to live in the thatched hut with his two beloved wives The blue sky protectively overshadowed the hut, and the towering trees fanned it gently All kinds of tubers and roots of creepers, and fruit-trees, provided us with food The forest grasses served us as laps in which we slept

31

The routine of the Maharaja was to finish his puja in the morning and go into the forest to look for roots, shoots and fruits, spending the whole day there and returning in the evening We fetched water from the lake, plastered and cleaned the hut, and prepared for puja And so the days passed Memories of Hastinapura faded Two years had elapsed since we left Hastinapura

The Maharaja had started looking somewhat emaciated His long beard made him appear aged He behaved as if he was always lost in profound thought It was difficult to guess what was going on in his mind He did not speak one word more than what was strictly necessary, and did not smile even by mistake One day a pretty little fawn came nuzzling up to him and began licking his feet with his furry tongue I thought he would gently push the fawn away from him Instead, he squatted, ran his hand lovingly on the kid's back, picked him up, kissed him repeatedly—and started sobbing like a child A fearful thought entered my mind Has the Maharaja gone and lost his senses as a result of extreme mental pain? Worriedly I questioned him, "What are you doing?" Without looking at me, he rubbed his cheek against the fawn's skin and replied, "Kunti, what can I say? If a childless man doesn't have any place in this world, how can he have it in heaven? Isn't it true that he will be forgotten as soon as he dies? I am not a world-conquering emperor but a beggar in the kingdom of the Creator My name will vanish with my death "

"And that is what makes you so sad? If that is so, then I will use Rishi Durvasas' mantra and obtain a son for the sake of your name Maharishi Durvasas has given me a mantra that can summon gods "

I informed him about the *yajna* performed by the Maharishi

"Kunti, did the Creator make you my wife for the sole purpose of redeeming my shame?"

'Maharaja, you will soon see in this thatched hut the meritorious son you long for "

And with that I closed the subject

Some days later, one morning I scooped water in my hollowed palm to sip ritually before the religious ceremony, and closed my eyes The words of the mantra revolved in the cave of my mind With each word I seemed progressively to lose my body-consciousness I remembered the earth which carries the weight of the whole world, and I summoned Yama, who is simultaneously the god of death and dharma My body became a mass of radiance A streak of light sped out of the earth, pierced that radiance, and flashed away Slowly I started becoming conscious of my body My tuber root and fruit nourished body trembled uncontrollably, and I fell with a thud on the ground

I stopped speaking from that day, preferring solitude I was attracted more and more to serenity Loud speech irritated me A unique new life began for me all over again My body blossomed

At the appropriate time, one day at dawn, I felt a pain in my womb I became a mother A serene-faced son was born The faces of all lit up with joy They named him Yudhishthira The child grew up in the thatched hut He never cried, but he never smiled either His appearance was always calm, like a river-bed He had large eyes

The Maharaja, forgetting everything, devoted himself to playing with the boy We had already forgotten Hastinapura, and now we forgot our own sorrows as well

Yudhishthira was now a year old The second year I obtained a son from the wind god Vayu, a shapely and chubby little boy We decided to name him Bhima He grew up to be as swift as the wind He could not sit still in one place even for a second After Bhima I was gifted a son by the god Indra This dark-complexioned boy was brilliant in every way He was born punctu ally at noon His black eyes seemed to emit fiery sparks of person ality We named him Arjuna Yudhishthira Bhima and Arjuna—the thatched hut echoed with their playful gurgling I felt cont ented fulfilled Dhatri the Maharaja and I spent hours discussing plans for their future—what they would do and what they would become Dhatri would always reiterate Bhima is not one to listen to anybody He will beat up anyone who opposes him He can t sit quiet for even a second

Madri would listen to our conversations, sitting quietly in one corner. She never spoke a word to anyone. She lived in a world of her own. I guessed why she was so lonesome. It doesn't take very long for one woman to divine the reason behind another woman's sadness. She wanted children of her own. I asked her once beside the lake, "Madri, are you feling sad because you don't have children?" Instead of replying, she clung to me and sobbed. I stroked her back and said, "Madri, you are a daughter-in-law of the Kauravas. Don't cry. You also will be a mother of sons."

I scooped two palmsful of water from the lake and remembered Rishi Durvasas. Seating Madri in front of me, I poured the water in her hand and started declaiming the mantra. My body started feeling void, like a quiver emptied of arrows. Mantra-chant over, I opened my eyes, and asked Madri, "Do you remember the words of the mantra now?" She nodded yes. I too started to recall the words, but I failed. I rooted about in my memory for the words, but to no avail. Kunti had passed on her last shakti to another, and she was now an ordinary woman, a less than common woman. She had only her sons and her husband as her wealth. I returned from the lake to the thatched hut, feeling like a musk-deer robbed of musk.

Madri had twin sons, Nakula and Sahadeva. There were nine humans now in the thatched hut—the Maharaja, Madri, I, Dhatri, and the five boys. Ten years had elapsed since we left Hastinapura. Time rushed by like a mountain wind.

We had no idea of what had transpired during this decade in Hastinapura and what had happened to the Kuru dynasty. The hill we stayed on was near-inaccessible. Hardly anyone came to that forest. We were cut off from the outisde world. The outside world was to us like a land of dreams. The forest was our home, its multitude of creatures our fellow-beings, its bird song our entertainment, and we had become true denizens of the forest.

32

A woman, with her sons around her, can turn a wilderness into heaven. And there were three of us women! We spent all our time playing with the children, enjoying their lisping, and teasing them. Small they were—but very bright. Bhima was the only one who gave us the slip. Like a huge elephant's trunk constantly swinging,

he was on the move all the time Not still for even an eye-blink And he seemed to grow stronger and more and more muscular every day All five brothers grew on a diet of milk of wild cows and fruits The forest breeze entertained them with the flute-music of its peregrinations Their boyish laughter enchanted the thatched hut Even the aging heart of Dhatri broke into buds of blossoming affection, and she would often play games with them Blue sky above and green earth below—in this manner the five grew, like five teak trees More dear than beauty, wealth and fame are children to their mother She feels fulfilled only when two silken baby lips suck sweetly at her breast Motherhood is a woman's moksha

I was once more at the pinnacle of happiness Life is a game of joy and sorrow, light and shade The forest became our kingdom—a kingdom obtained without subjugating anyone, and I was its Maharani

The Maharaja forgot his own tribulations seeing us playing with the children Playing with them, he even forgot his life-wounding curse He laughed as he used to before, and talked freely, with an open mind

33

Year after year passed The children became youths, roaming fearlessly in the forest They always went out together The hill of Shatashringa was soon too small to contain the variety of their games and exploits Bhima would return, dragging tiger cubs by their ears Environment modulates life, and so a man becomes what his companions are And children just love to imitate any way They learnt from us—and they learnt their basic lifestyle even more from the surrounding forest The rituals and ceremonies of Nature educated them all through childhood They were now between ten and twelve years old

The streams of the forest taught them this Let your life flow, keep it flowing They had no experience of life's stagnant or still lakes The towering mountain peaks counselled them Be tall, walk erect The blue sky above advised Keep your mind pure The trees that sheltered the numerous forest creatures said Be compassionate The high flying birds said Aspire towards the best

They bombarded us with thousands of questions till we were fed up

Yudhishthira would ask, "Mother, who has created the blue sky-dome over the earth? Where are its pillars?"

I would reply, "Son, it was Bhagavan Shiva who to protect the gods drank the poison that emerged from the primal churning of the ocean The poison turned his throat blue That blue is the sky "

Arjuna would ask, "Mother, when the wind blows swiftly, why does it whistle su-u-u-n su-u-u-n?"

I would reply, "Arjuna, Bhagavan Rama Chandra was a mighty archer The arrows he released from his bow to kill rakshasas were so swift that no one was able to stop their flight Some of those arrows are still circling the earth Their tail feathers produce this whistling scream " He would start pondering this

Bhima would ask, "Mother, how were mountains made?"

I would reply, "Bhima, in Bhagavan Rama Chandra's time there was a powerful general named Hanuman He was a great sky-ranger It so happened that he once wanted to descend on earth, but the earth in those times was an uncongealed marsh He placed his foot in the morass, wherever his foot fell, a deep pit was created The rear parts swelled and rose high These swollen parts became what we now call hills and mountains Wading through the swamps, Hanuman-ji got disgusted, and flew up again to the sky A huge chunk stuck to his foot, and that chunk is what we call the moon " He listened to me with wide-open mouth, and started imitating the colossal size of Hanuman by puffing his cheeks and raising his shoulders

Nakula and Sahadeva would ask, "Mother, why does lightning flash in the sky?"

I would reply, "The gods and anti gods are always battling in the sky Lightning flashes are the glittering swords in the hands of the gods "

Nakula swung his hand in mock combat against Sahadeva

The boys would ask me many similar questions They accepted all that I said It was enough to satisfy them

34

Our days passed happily. We had no desire to leave the hill of

Shatashringa A tender feelings develops for any place where a person stays for any considerable period of time—a feeling of a wonderful oneness Shatashringa was now our permanent residence, and it would be the natural thing to expect that my last breath would also mingle with its breezes I had no regrets, because we had been looked after by this mountain for close to eighteen years But there is no personality in this world more unpredictable than Kala, the Spirit of Time, who colours everything according to his whims—and how swiftly too! In no time at all he turns everything topsy-turvy In a second he becomes a python swallowing up whole cities that bustled with pleasure on the face of the earth The culture that man painstakingly constructs over thousands of years is obliterated by the Spirit of Kala as if it were no better than a sand fort sculpted by a child and washed away by an ocean wave Isn't this world nothing more than a one-man fiefdom whose ruler is Time? Where can you find fine fellowship and perfect unity here? Who is the dice-player who gambles with human life? Who the puppeteer dangling these dolls? How infinitesimally petty is human life in this colossal cosmos that we call the Egg of Brahma! To Time who effects a complete transformation in nature whenever he so desires, man must seem to better than a flimsy bubble to prick and burst at will The blowing of this bubble is no gain to the world, nor its bursting any loss The world remains what it is

But there are times when the bursting of this bubble creates inevitable ripples in human life And these ripples can on occasion become whirlpools They destroy confidence, they consume faith They raise doubts about the existence of a Supreme Power called God The mind wanders perplexed Like a bird trapped in a forest fire, it flaps about in futile agony

It took just one incident to reduce me to this state One day Madri went to the lake to fetch water A little later, as was his custom, the Maharaja also went into the forest Madri returned in a short while, but her heart-piercing, pitiful screams made me rush in alarm out of the thatched hut She had no water-pot in her hands Beating her breast, tearing her hair, and shouting "Elder sister!" like a madwoman, she ran towards me, swift as wind, but tripping and stumbling Her dress was in disarray Had anyone come in front of her at that time, she would certainly have dashed against him and fallen on the ground I was completely at a loss A

pang of fear coursed through my veins What could have happened to Madri? Where was the pot she had taken with her to fetch water in? Were the five young boys safe or

She fell on me in a heap, screaming *Jiji*! Elder sister!" all the time Touching her chin, I lifted her face up to me and asked, "Madri, why are you crying? Where's your pot?"

"Smashed," she said and clung to me Seeing her confusion decrease, I asked, "Madri, you are a brave lady Why are you sobbing like a little girl? Tell me what's happened "

'*Jiji* Maharaja " she replied and again clung to me An embrace that was full of pain Her heart palpitated with fear

"What's happened to him? Tell me, Madri, where is he?" I shouted

"Beside the lake "

Her words made me prick up my ears, like a startled calf Pushing her aside, I ran to the lake She followed, keeping pace The sight I saw beside the lake was sufficient to make me lose al faith in life and the world My lord, my life precious life compan -ion, lay lifeless as a log of wood on the ground The body tha pulsed with the blood of the Kurus, the body that shamed even the Sun-God, lay there, dark and lifeless, like a burnt-out faggot Thinking he had fainted, I placed my hand on his body in order to revive him My hair stood on end—his body was ice cold I rose and asked Madri, "Madri, how did this happen?"

She turned her face away and replied huskily, "*Jiji*, it wasn't my fault I had filled the pot and was returning from the lake He was standing on the lake's edge My *anchal* was fluttering in the breeze, but because of the pot on my head I wasn't able to cover myself properly He looked at me and smiled He threw away his a^e There was a strange gleam in his eyes

"The moment I came near, he pulled me towards himself and clasped me tightly My water-pot fell and shattered The fire of lust shone in his eyes Embracing me, he kept repeating 'Madri! Madri!' and raining kisses on me I struggld fiercely to break free, but I couldn't He pounced on me like a famished man on food I felt suffocatd in his tight embrace Then, suddenly, he came to his senses He pushed me away as if I were a poisonous reptile But but his body started changing, his eyes rolled, he collapsed on the ground He flailed his arms and legs as if hanging on to life 'Madri! Madri!' he writhed in agony I was stunned with fear Then I started running to you "

I slapped Madri hard. She started wailing even louder. My ears throbbed with the words of Rishi Kindam's curse: "Raja, you have separated a lover from his beloved. When you wish to make love to your wife as I did, you too will die a similar agonising death."

My life-companion had left me to start on his final journey. A single instant of lust was enough to snatch him away from the verdure of life and deposit him on the pyre of death. Only one instant was required to turn Kunti into a widow in order to test her powers of fortitude. The great world-conquering self-disciplining emperor did finally become a feeble beggar in the kingdom of lust. A yogi who for years had controlled himself had in just *one* instant become a victim of the yearnings of his weak will. Lust! Lust—the deep, deceitful ditch where a man may slip and fall any moment. Lust—the lightning that can strike at any time and destroy one's life. The fire that burns to ashes not just oneself but others also.

My self-control snapped. Screaming, "Maharaja!" I collapsed on his corpse and beat my head on his chest. The vermilion spot on my forehead was wiped away.

35

Dhatri began making preparations for the cremation. She built the pyre. A world-conquering emperor's pyre, in an unpeopled lonely forest beside a lake. What else had Fate in store for me? I was a widow at thirtytwo. A woman without a husband, a lamp without a flame. What was my status now? A Yadava king's respected daughter? The glorious Maharani of the Kauravas? The forest-queen of this wilderness? The fortune-favoured mother of sons whose feats will illuminate the world? *Chhee! Chhee!* I wasn't any of these. I was just a lifeless hulk of a widow, a fate-afflicted, ruined relic. Widow! A terrifying word! Maharani, widow, young girl! *Chhee!* What was common in all these three? What is life after all? Taking one twisting turn after another, where was my life stream going to end? What was Kunti's future going to be? *Chhee!* Even the wisest astrologer of all, Lord Brahma himself, wouldn't be able to predict her future. Where was I going to get the fortitude to endure the burning wounds of misfortune? Who will be patient with me, who will console me in this forest? Where can a person go for shelter when the entire sky collapses all around him?

I had placed a helpless baby in the lap of Death— was that the reason I was being punished by the same fierce teeth-gnashing Death? In front, a yawning pit, and at the back, a horrendous forest—was that all my life was? As a child, I was a plaything in father's hands In Bhojpur a plaything of Durvasas, and today a toy of Time which sped past me furiously Trying to catch up with Time would lead to my total destruction Whose support should I now take on life's road? My mind's?—but I had no mind of my own any more And if I had, it was no better than deaf It made no distinctions between past, future, and present Time like a cheetah was dragging Kunti's half dead goat-body and swiftly rushing away I was silent I didn't feel even like crying, because no tears oozed from my congealed heart Nor were my thoughts so soft as to burst to tears

Placing the Maharaja's corpse on the pyre, Dhatri stacked funeral sticks on it She lit the pyre A maid lit the pyre of an illustrious, world-conquering warrior who made his foes tremble in fear! The flames leapt like birds flapping towards the sky My feelings were all numb I rose with the intention of mounting the pyre What was the use of this meaningless life any more? I determinedly tucked in my *anchal* By this time, Madri had bathed in the lake, she came dressed in white, touched my feet and respectfully took her hand over her head Without once looking back to see if I had anything to say, she entered the burning pyre Her white dress burst instantly into flames My heart, like a bird pierced by an arrow, anguished for her I was the one who had slapped her across the face I was the one who had thought her to be a slave of her passions But how swiftly had she made up her mind She had cocked a contemptuous thumb at Rishi Kindam and paid Death his price by not abandoning her beloved husband at his funeral pyre No one's curse would now separate her from her beloved's embrace I steeled myself to follow her example Exactly then the five princes ran out of the thatched hut and clung to me Shaking me, they asked, "Mata, where is Pita-ji?" Nakula and Sahadeva said with pitiful, choked voices, "Where is our Chhoti-ma?"

Seeing them, my deaf heart melted Supposing I had leapt into the pyre also? Where would Dhatri have gone with these five princes? Abandoning one son had given me such sleepless nights Wrong or right—I don't know what it was But but if I had abandoned

these five dependent children, then—then that surely would be wrong I clasped them to me, and sobbed loudly They clung to me like chicks All my plans crumbled—even the decision to immolate myself

The flaming pyre faded and fell silent Ashes floated in the air Two divine beings who till yesterday had chatted with me of joy and sorrow—where had they disappeared? Death is the one whirlpool in the river of life that no one can cross Death is the self-willed horse in the non-stop chariot of the Creator Who knows how many lives it has trampled under his hooves till today? Today his eyes had spotted my little thatched hut In the form of Rishi Kindam s curse and Madri's decision, he had shredded me The black storehouse of Death had obviously not been filled yet with all the deaths of the world till now He had added two more lives in it But by so doing he had wiped my fate clean from my forehead I approached the pyre and rubbed its ash on my vermilion-less forehead That ash contained the burning tears of an unfortunate Maharani as well as the death-defiant joyous tears of a beloved, along with the defeated blood drops of a once-victorious king, and

And the burnt-out nectarine words of Rishi Durvasas' god-summoning mantra which had been reduced to ash along with the body of Madri

36

I returned to the thatched hut—a hut that seemed now to be fretful and hostile The Maharaja s and Madri's presences seemed to me to be in every grass shoot and every leaf of the hut Had I stayed there even a moment longer, I would surely have gone mad I was patient by nature, I was a Kshatriya girl, a brave mother, but after all I was only a woman Which woman could possibly have remained calm after the gruesome happenings in this dessolate, frightening forest? I had only one choice—to return to Hastinapura Not for my sake, but for the sake of my sons I decided to go back to Hastinapura I was a helpless mother at that time And a mother has no pride—she has only affection and tenderness How could I possibly stay on in the forest with my innocent sons and Dhatri? The same curse that made me leave was now making me return to Hastinapura When I left, there were

four of us. I, the Maharaja, Madri, and Dhatri. But, returning, there were five sons in place of the Maharaja and Madri. If I went all out to bring them up properly, their future could at least be assured. Otherwise, they would perish in the fires of harsh reality exactly as our life's seeds had been consumed. Tears were not going to help me in any way. Tears do not change destiny. The best thing was to boldly spit in the face of circumstances. I had to show society which believed in the helplessness of women and I had to show the play of circumstances that I was perfectly capable of nurturing five lotuses in the mud of hostile forces. We left Shatashringa hill and moved towards Hastinapura, after a gap of twenty years. How transformed must Hastinapura be after these two decades! And surely the feelings of Hastinapura's citizens for Maharani Kunti must be clouded by this time.

37

A month later we arrived on the bank of the Ganga. In the far distance was Hastinapura. As soon as I reached the Ganga, I was reminded of the ear-rings of the Queen Mother which I had thrown into the Ganga's waters. They must be lying embedded deep in the Ganga's mud—and the two live ear rings that I had abandoned in the Ashva river—where were they now? and how were they? What had all these years done to that innocent boy? He must have been brought up as another charioteer in a family of charioteers. He was probably a groomer of horses. Probably asking everyone questions about his flesh ear rings. Had I known then that my fate was going to take this miserable turn, I would have taken him and gone away somewhere. But the intention with which I abandoned him, did that intention get fulfilled at all? How many days had I been able to spend as a Maharani in Hastinapura? Harsh Time had exacted a heavy revenge for my abandoning him. But I had now made up my mind. A woman can make the best out of the worst circumstances. The only duty for me now was to give single minded attention to bringing up my five sons. That golden ear ringed boy was like the fallen *chandola* chick under the *ashoka* tree in the palace garden. That was no one's fault. If blame had to be apportioned, it was uncaring Fate's. Only Time could now unite him to his brothers. None else. Not Pritha, not Pritha's father, not Durvasas.

We set foot in the city I had come to this city as a Maharani, I left it as a *sannyasini*, and I was returning to it after twenty years as a widow But my mind was at peace The blows of fate had somehow made me indifferent I had realised that grief was not the ultimate cure for sorrow What's going to happen is going to happen And there is always a deep meaning in whatever happens There is always some cause for it Nothing happens without meaning in this world

We reached the palace I prepared myself to face the Queen Mother's interrogation But the minister confronted me with very unexpected news He said, "News that the Maharaja had left the kingdom untimely and taken to the forest so shocked the Queen Mother that she forsook Hastinapura for ever "

The only support for me now was liberal-minded Bhishma As soon as he saw me, he said affectionately, "Kunti, where are Pandu and Madri?"

I replied with composure, "They have gone to Rishi Kindam to enquire about my future "

He advanced, placed his hand on my shoulder, and intoned gravely, "Why he to foretell your future? I, Bhishma, can tell you that Kunti, from today you are the Queen Mother of the Kauravas Go, enter the palace '

With my five sons and Dhatri, I stepped on the stairs, and looked back at Grandsire Bhishma He was wiping his eyes with the end of his shawl

38

In twenty years Hastinapura had totally changed All the reins of government had passed into Dhritarashtra's hands Soon after we left for the forest, he married the lovely princess Gandhari Devi of Gandhara Our younger brother in law Vidura had also married, but he had no real powers—he acted only as an adviser Many of the elder Kauravas of the palace had long since gone on their final journeys Bhishma alone stood firm like the Himalyas and conscientiously continued to look after the general welfare Maharishi Vyasa s boon had granted Gandhari Devi one hundred sons and a daughter, Duhshali Duryodhana was the eldest son The Kaurava dynasty had proliferated like a massive banyan The skilled Guru Drona had come to the city to train the princes in the

art of war I stayed in the palace as Queen Mother The people loved the children because they happened to be the sons of the Maharaja The Maharaja's previous world-conquest and their fear of Bhishma helped to make the citizens respect me as the Queen Mother My sons joined the military school for princes to learn war-craft Their inborn intelligence and sensitivity made them beloved of everyone Arjuna was Guru Drona's favourite pupil Drona always said, "There will never be an archer to equal Arjuna in the whole of Aryavarta " My sons also were very loving with each other No one could ever have believed that they were stepbrothers

My Fate slapped mind, seeing this, relaxed somewhat I was inwardly happy that my returning had led to the welfare of my children I could now sit back and bask in the joy of being the Queen Mother This title of Queen Mother had emerged after twenty years of firing in the kiln of exile I was proud of that And why not? Though a mere woman, had I not risen unexpectedly to the occasion by braving all the vagaries of circumstances? Not just braving, remaining calm as well I breathed easy now as the Queen Mother I was optimistic about the future of the five Pandava princes But but there were times when memories of my first born in Bhojpura filled my mind—and then a deep unease would overcome me

39

It happened two years after my return to Hastinapura I had gone to have a darshan of the deity in the Vishnu temple in the heart of the city Grandsire Bhishma had ordered a specially constructed curtained chariot for me I was driven in that chariot to the temple Though six horses were intended to be yoked to that chariot, I insisted that the charioteer yoke only five He argued, ' Raj mata, a horse less makes it look so awkward Besides, the chariot's balance is affected " And I would reply, "Let it be That empty space will always remind me of someone Yoke just five horses The world likes the number five, not six "

I was returning after the darshan The chariot was almost inside the palace grounds Then a sudden jolt, and the chariot rolled to a halt I asked the charioteer, 'What's wrong? Why has it stopped?" He replied, "Some unknown boy crossed our path He dashed

across at the risk of his life to save a kitten from being run over I reined in the horses, and he was luckily saved "

I felt puzzled by the boy's deed Saving a kitten at the risk of his own life! And I—I, a mother, had pushed away my own child far from me How grown-up he must be by now Should he come to me now, I would hug him tight against my breast But but

Social convention prevented me from going to the city where he was What was he doing there? He'll be a grown young man by now Where was he? Who does he love as his mother? These and many other thoughts invaded my mind Intending to return to the palace and relax on my bed, I said to the charioteer, "No stopping for any reason Drive straight to the palace "

He cracked his whip The crack made me wonder Was my son similarly urging horses forward? The thought hurt me What was his name? How tall he must have become! How did his flesh-earrings look now? Revolving these thoughts in my mind, I arrived at the palace

40

The river of Time flowed on, meandering around the curves of days and nights Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva grew more popular day by day with the people, who treated them with the utmost respect My mind again swayed happily on the swing of joy In remembrance of the Maharaja, the subjects addressed my sons as "the Pandavas"

Not one of my sons ever did anything without consulting me The pains I had endured now bore fruit The sight of my five sons sometimes filled my eyes with tears of joy I was at last at peace But just as a passing elephant's feet disturbs a pond's tranquillity, sometimes an incident or two sufficed to upset my mind's calm Then all the memories would rush here and there in my mind My whole life would appear before me from early childhood till now And then my own fortitude started impressing me From where had I started, and where had I reached! I had not taken even one step on my own accord The truth is that man does a lot of social mixing, but basically he remains alone Each has to bear his sorrow alone Each has to pursue his hereditary pattern I had learnt this truth well Just as a tiger chases a deer, my memories chased me, and when they did, I turned my mind to practical

activities And so the memories died away Sometimes it becomes imperative that one live for another, and live for another by quietly swallowing one's tears of pain That was how I passed my days

My sons, in their Pandava roles, became famous in all the neighbouring kingdoms Maharaja Dhritarashtra used to mention them respectfully often when we talked I was not only the Queen Mother, but the mother of five valiant sons I forgot even the fact that there was a time when I had passed twenty years in the forest Ah, how swiftly do days of happiness pass! How quickly did the war-training of the Pandavas proceed! The childish questioning Yudhishthira and Bhima of only eysterday had suddenly become so adult and sweet-speaking They grew physically—but they grew simultaneously in intellect also

Bhima and Arjuna grew like the moon in the bright fortnight Day and night they spent in the military academy Spear, dagger, pipe-gun, *bhusundi*, discus, bow and various other weapons became areas of their expertise They would spend hours on end discussing all types of weapons Their physiques looked fit and splendid in the gymnasium Their gentle behaviour charmed everybody Arjuna became the specialist in bowcraft Yudhishthira was pre-eminent in scriptures on Dharma Bhima was as stout and rotund as an *ashoka* tree His wheat-complexioned arm muscles were as well-formed and solid as the handle of a mace Nakula and Sahadeva became skilled swordsmen None of the brothers performed any activity without first taking the dust of my feet and my blessings

Bhima was hot-headed, he was always strutting around brandishing his mace Seeing his massive frame and the mace in his hand, none so much as even said a word He would burst into anger any time Because he had such powerful arms, he never verbally criticised or insulted anyone He simply gave them a good hammering I was always trying to keep him in check In front of me, he was as quiet as a mouse No one else had the ability to persuade him, but it was impossible for me as well to try to change his belligerent nature He was always roughing up people behind my back He just adored the mace—a quality he shared with Duryodhana My nephew Balarama came all the way from Mathura to instruct them on how to wield the mace After I left Mathura, my father was blessed with a jewel of a son called

Vasudeva Balarama was Vasudeva's son Vasudeva had one other son, Krishna, who stayed in Mathura

Bhima and Duryodhana sometimes clashed with each other in Balarama's class, and I would get news of it all the time I did my best to mollify Bhima, but day by day his physical strength grew and would not let him be Duryodhana was stubborn and proud, and it was difficult to tell what lurked behind his pink eyes

I devised an amusing promise to keep Bhima's anger in control He was in a happy mood at the time Among them all, Yudhishthira was the most calm and reasonable In the hope that his reasoning would reach out to Bhima, I said, "Bhima, whenever you find your anger rising inside you, make it a point to glance at Yudhishthira's right toe If he bends it up, you speak up, if not, remain silent Don't even open your mouth I command you to do this "

He took it seriously enough to practise it till this day Even when he became an adult, he would, in front of Yudhishthira, become as harmless as a fangless snake

I heard a strange story once Duryodhana and his brothers, along with the five Pandavas, had gone to the forest on a pleasure jaunt They roamed till noon They had taken food with them Around noon they decided to have a light snack beside a lake Duryodhana started stuffing Bhima with sweetmeats Bhima had very little discrimination in matters of food that was the way he was So Duryodhana kept stuffing him, and he kept gobbling Snack over, they drank water, and lay down to rest under a tree But Bhima was unable to get up even for a drink of water, he just flopped down All thought he was dozy, and was sleeping But he wasn't asleep He had fainted Duryodhana had placed a sleeping potion in the sweets Seeing all relaxing under the tree, Duryodhana crept up to Bhima, trussed his arms and legs with creepers from a nearby tree and flung him, still drugged, in the lake The touch of water slowly revived my Bhima Fully conscious, he emerged from the lake It is possible that God's grace made a water-deity in the lake protect Bhima

I got this news from an attendant, but I didn't believe him, because I had full faith that my other four sons would on no account leave Bhima alone even for a fraction of a second and go away Besides, I knew that the type of food that Bhima ate every day was such that his intestines would digest and neutralise all kinds of poisons

41

One by one, twelve years rolled by My sons became as tall and sturdy as *khadira* trees When they walked, they looked like the five horses of a chariot, and people *namaskara ed* them respectfully

I completely forgot my forest-story Every mother has a special pride in her dutiful young son And I had five dutiful sons Wasn't I justified in my pride? Happiness was showering the five fold ambrosia of *panchamrita* on me in the shape of my five sons I was receiving the sweet happy fruit of my patiently borne sorrows I was the mother of five heroes I was the Queen Mother of the citizens

One day Guru Drona went with his disciples to bathe in the Ganga My sons naturally were in that group All of them emerged from the river after their bath In the knowledge that all of them had finished their bath, Guru Drona also came out But as soon as he put one foot on the bank, he started teetering and shouting, "Help! Help!" A crocodile's tail was seen thrashing in the waters The reptile had snapped at Guru Drona's foot inside the water Nonplussed, all started running helter-skelter, not knowing what to do Duryodhana stepped forward and gripped Guru Drona's hand Arjuna saw it all He aimed his bow and swiftly fired seven or eight arrows at the crocodile Like a floating log of wood the creature shot out of the water, the Ganga reddening with his blood Guru Drona escaped He thumped Arjuna's back and said, Arjuna, you have saved my life Today I will gift you my Brahma-weapon You will find it useful in the future " He handed over the weapon along with its mantra After this incident, I looked upon my Arjuna as the tallest of my Himalayan hopes He was going to complete the half-finished line drawn by his unfortunate curse-consumed father

Guru Drona visited the palace regularly He praised all my sons He always treated me with the utmost respect He would proudly tell everyone that I was the mother of Arjuna Once it happened that he said, "Queen Mother, all the boys are now well trained It is necessary now to test their skill No skill is proved except by competition "

"But, Gurudeva, they say that competition blinds a man If this is true, why have one?"

"It's not so Competition is an essential aspect of life Without competition, man stagnates His talents don't fructify Fair competition is the pure voice of the atman I will soon make arrangements for various competitive displays "

"Soon? When?"

"In the full moon of spring "

And so word was sent to everyone about the appointed day through a minister I started looking forward to that day I did want to see how weapon-skilled my sons were I wanted to see their brilliant feats

42

The day of spring's full moon arrived and passed The Supreme hero of Hastinapura was selected As the mother of the Pandavas, I was given pride of place in the pavilion enclosure reserved for the palace ladies But that day's events fully brought home to me the fact of who I was I do not think Time has passed any mother through so horribly cruel a test as I was, insulted any mother as I was insulted

That day, at the close of the competition, when Guru Drona was about to place a blue-lotus victory garland round Arjuna's neck a sturdily-built, tall and radiant young man entered by the main gate, slapping his arm-pits and shouting, "Wait!" He looked so fearless, so intense In a second he leapt on to the centre of the stone platform and, standing there, shouted, "Prince Arjuna's exploits on this platform today—I can perform them all Do I have permission?"

Maharaja Dhritarashtra raised his sceptre to signify approval He jumped off the platform nimbly, as if a stream of light were flashing across the arena at lightning speed From one arena to another he ran until he arrived at the wrestling pit, exactly facing our enclosure Wearing only a loin cloth, that youth looked as if the Nagashata hill was walking His bare body glowed with such solar splendour that it was difficult to guess whether the Sun-God had come on earth or was up in the sky He was as tall as a sky-reaching sal tree His ripened cheeks were red like flame-of-the-forest blossoms His long, curly, golden hair fell on his massive shoulders like a lion's mane Occasionally he turned his back towards us, it was smooth and large, like a slice of rich yellow

jackfruit The slightest movement on his part made his muscles ripple all over his body like powerful undulating serpents His face was roundly shaped like the head of a mace His neck was conch-shaped and as tightly placed on his shoulder as an elephant's stuck in mud Shouting "Karna! Karna!" the audience welcomed him He grappled with his wrestling opponent and applied the difficult "thorny-arm" grip His adversary thrashed his legs and arms, fearing for his life He glanced in our direction I felt as if lightning had struck me Throwing reddish-blue shadows on his pink cheeks were two golden flesh ear-rings It could be no one else—twenty-five years ago I had cast him in the Ashva river—he was the same son of Surya Had he come here in his father's shape to destroy everyone? How grand he looked! His gait was the proud gait of wild horses He was even more handsome than any of my five sons And why not?—he was Surya's son, after all His whole body radiated light "Karna!" What secrets lay hidden in those two syllables! Apart from Dhatri and myself, none in the arena knew anything Even Karna had no idea Strangers were hailing him as a hero, but he was not an ordinary hero, he was a hero of heroes That was his true lineage He was my firstborn The first, the eldest Pandava My maternal instincts, agonising for twenty years, now agonised afresh What did I care if the whole audience there got swallowed up in the earth? All I wanted was to embrace him to my heart just once—I wanted to kiss his flesh-ear-rings—for twenty years I hadn't once had the chance to kiss them I wanted to caress with all my heart my shining golden lotus of a son who was brought up by the Ganga-Yamuna-Charmanvati rivers For twenty years my heart had wept for him Not once had I been able to breastfeed him My mother's heart would not give me a moment's peace There was a strange, never-before experienced turmoil of separation raging inside me The milk which his sweet baby lips never sucked suddenly filled my breasts They throbbed I rose My breasts were heavy with milk, my bodice drenched What should I do? Only a shimmering curtain stood between him and me A see through drape, but difficult to cross A curtain that divided mother and son A curtain fashioned by society, by royal blood, by conventions What if I tore it apart, and stepped out? Then what would happen? Would Karna embrace me? Would love for his mother fill his eyes with tears? What if I shook his shoulders and said, "I am your mother" Would he believe me?

What if a madman were to declare in the arena that the Queen Mother had become senile after the exile and her husband's death, wouldn't they all accept his words as true? Who was I then? Queen Mother? Mother of five heroes? Or was I the melancholy Kunti who had accepted all the slaps of a cruel Fate? No, I was an eternally-grieving tortured mother who wanted passionately to be one with her lost son. But I was helpless. I flapped like a fish out of water. The darshan of my son made milk gush from my breasts—and I was powerless to prevent it. The world must be seeing Karna as a great hero, but to me he was only my new-born baby. My heart beat its wings vainly, like a caged mynah. In desperation I pressed my breasts. But the milk-flow did not cease. This was the milk that I had kept suppressed for eighteen years. It was not possible to suppress it any more. I sat down. Dhatri supported me. She was short-sighted, and could not see who was in the arena. I was the only woman in the arena who knew the details of Karna's life. I was responsible for all that had happened. I could have changed the entire situation with a single word. But I had to remain silent. No word came from my mouth, though I tried.

Karna left the bowcraft platform. His target feats astonished all. He was acknowledged as the supreme hero of the day. But the situation had become unpleasant with the victory garland going to Arjuna. Karna stood on the platform, slapped his arms, and challenged Arjuna to a duel. Acharya Kripa asked Karna his family lineage. Duryodhana crowned Karna king on the platform itself.

Events moved with lightning rapidity.

The Sun-God's son, reared as a charioteer, became instantaneous king. Briefly, a corner of my heart glowed with happiness. No matter how, he had become a king. A raja is always superior to a charioteer. But he had challenged Arjuna to a duel, which meant victory or death. Two blood-brothers unknowingly pitted against each other—and in the presence of their mother! It was Fate that made Karna's foster father Adhiratha step in at that moment. Otherwise... oh, what might not have happened! I couldn't even imagine it. One of the two would certainly have perished—and with his mother to witness it. And all the spectators also to witness it and shout and clap! But Karna is a charioteer's son—as soon as that was announced, all started laughing and mocking him,

demeaning him by shouting "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" The contemptible rabble—to spit at the son of the Sun-God! And in front of his mother! "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" These shouts penetrated every pore of my body like spear-points. Who was it whom they decried as a charioteer? There wasn't one among all that scum of Hastinapura with dignity enough to even look him in the eyes. Their confused cries pounded in my head. The arena in front of my eyes blurred and swam hazily before me. There is a limit to what one can bear. What was going on all around me? An ugly demonstration by a bunch of lunatics. I couldn't stop them. My body's equilibrium flagged on the verge of collapse. I tightly shut my ears with my hands. I fell with a thud on the ground, like a plaintain tree uprooted by a storm. I could hear nothing, I could see nothing. I lost consciousness.

43

O my son Karna, what has happened to you? Ah, it isn't possible even to describe it. You don't know who you are. Like mynahs pecking and devouring a snake, the world's cries of "low-caste, lowcaste" are devouring you. "Low-born, low-born"—that's how you are insulted to the core of your being every instant all the world over. Today your life is forced to absorb insults worse than death. A repulsive state that humiliates you. Mockery more terrifying than a lightning bolt. You are a powerful hero and a valiant warrior, yet you have to swallow these insults because you don't know who you are. As soon as the world pounced on you, you paled and lost your bearings, because you don't know who you are. They left no stone unturned in degrading you. Who could have borne such insults, Karna? *Arre*, is this a sign of your fortitude, or ignorance or helplessness? I know it isn't a sign of your fortitude. No one can say that you are the helpless type. It is your ignorance then. Your mind is a battleground of opposing ideas, because you don't know who you really are. I know grass cannot extinguish flaming embers, but this ember has been covered by ashy ignorance. When the noise rose on all sides, you were perplexed. You shut your ears with your hands and closed your eyes tightly, because you don't know even the splendid Radiance of which you are the product. For twenty years no one breathed a word of it to you. *Arre*, you just grew and grew for

twenty years like a wild pandanus flower in a garden You have to endure today all the heart-piercing word-arrows shot at you by the world The world is mad—and will you continue to be silent after you have thought it all out? *Arre*, what is all this? Karna, you are standing on slippery ground, and, poor child, you are not even aware of it Even if you were aware, you are mistaken in your awareness If you continue in this error, the world will continue to address you as the son of a charioteer, and your true family lineage will be forever submerged, because those who do not have insight and foresight are doomed Their fame does not last for ever Who can explain all this to you today? I know that you were perplexed and upset by the questions—"Who am I? What should I do?" Seeking an answer to them, you battered your mind against the walls of your body Anxiety must have tortured your spirit You must have felt the earth slide from under you, because you still don't know who you really are For twenty years only one statement has been dinned in your ears, "You are a charioteer's son! You are a charioteer's son!" But is it true that you are a charioteer's son? No My darling son, you are not a charioteer I feel like adding a three-word denial, "You are not "

Your heritage is extraordinary, Karna You have no idea what sacred efforts were required by how many people who passed through such extreme suffering in order to give you birth, your physical appearance, and your nature You are indeed the son of Surya, born to dispel the occult darkness of the world Yet you slink like a thief and hide your face in your hands *Arre*, your face is not for hiding but for illuminating the world, because your lineage is so extraordinary Consider it carefully, look straight at the sparks of that throbbing Radiance, and you will yourself realise who you are

When they insulted you, you glanced worriedly in the direction of Hastinapura All Hastinapura is silent and helpless today Bhishma Dhritarashtra and Vidura are all learned and unselfish, but they cannot tell you who you really are, for how are they to know? Their silence only reflects their ignorance You looked all around you for some help or other, but who could have helped you? If tomorrow great calamity befalls you, who is there you can turn to for help? Has anyone ever succeeded in surviving by depending on the whims of a crazy world? Each has to know himself, each has to discover his hereditary roots, which is why you

are in such a vulnerable condition today. *Arre*, you have indeed come a very long way—and you know nothing about this. You are truly the Sun-God's son. Yet these capricious fireflies flick their insults at you. Your inner conflict has torn you apart. When will you ever learn?

What's going to happen if you continue like this? Nothing except that you'll actually become a low-born charioteer. One's own whip is best for oneself—your every pore will accept as fact that you are lowborn. You will be finished. All you'll ever do is drive others' chariots. All you'll ever be is someone's toy. Your individuality and your freedom will be wiped off the face of the earth. What good will it do you if you become self-aware too late? Then why me—even God Brahma will be powerless to redeem you. The dust stirred by the chariot and the vehicle's charioteer have the same status. Karna, are you no better than a chariot's dust? Just dust.

These and other fearful thoughts depress me because I am after all Karna's mother. Each fibre of my being throbs with his. They made fun of my illustrious boy by labelling him a charioteer's son. Is there any mother who can bear her son to be slandered in this way? This is what makes me so sad today. Dhatri like a crazy woman keeps asking me, "Why are you so sad, Maharani?" What words can I produce to explain to her the cause of my sadness? My life has been buffeted by countless storms. What was their purpose? I cannot make head or tail of anything. Haven't I been three separate Kuntis in my fifty-year span? Childhood's Pritha, young Kunti, and now widow Kunti honoured as Queen Mother Kunti agonising for her son. Each of these three lives was in someone or other's control. In childhood, I left Mathura so that my father's word would not get dishonoured, in youth, I left Hastinapura because there was a curse on the Maharaja, and now—now I have surrendered my life to the clutch of Kala because I have observed brother pitted against brother. Yesterday, unknowing Arjuna rose up against his brother Karna. Unknowing Bhima also shot a poisonous word-shaft at his eldest brother, saying, "Pick up your charioteer's whip, for that's what suits your family!" But even more than all this I feared Duryodhana. He had wickedly and accurately flung his eye-net at Karna. How cleverly he brought Karna over to his side today. What will happen to Karna in the grip of Duryodhana? That is what depresses me. How can I

explain all this to naive Dhatri? She asks, "Maharani-ji, why are you so sad?" Where are the words that will describe the cause of my sadness to her? What can I, though a Queen Mother, do for my alienated son? Nothing. No matter how much a man trumpets his power and abilities, he remains in the end a trivial plaything in the tyrannous hands of all-consuming Kala, Lord of Time. Again and again I get this desire to go to a massive public courtyard of Hastinapura and shout, "Karna is my son!" But where is my courage to do this? The point is that if I summoned such courage, what will become of my five other sons? Who can say? It could lead to another forest-exile for them. And it could lead to a condition where society would not allow me to be loving to Karna. Karna! Twice have I abandoned you—once after you were born, and the day before yesterday in the arena. O my unfortunate son of Surya! I have left my life to the hands of Kala, and your life I have left to the hands of your father.

BOOK 3

KARNA

1

The fact that I had become the Raja of Anga did not make me feel particularly propitious. I knew perfectly well that I was royal only as a recipient of Duryodhana's generosity. Only a weak and helpless person seeks to live on dole. I never wanted to get a royal title through another's favour. If one examined it closely, what kind of a title was it anyway? First, they rained flowers on me, sprinkled lustral water on me, hailed me as Karna, and then insulted me. The royal title was actually no more than a public humiliation. Humiliation! Humiliation linked to a coronation! No matter how poor and helpless, no person forgets a humiliation. And I happened to be a warrior. A warrior embraces death, but never accepts an insult to his self-respect. That day I felt such a revulsion for Hastinapura that I wanted my feet to propel me anywhere that very instant; I wanted to go to some place where a man was not even mistakenly judged by his birth, but assessed only by his merit. That was why I stood that evening on the parapet of the palace with Duryodhana who was watching a flock of *chitraratha*-birds and said, "King, I desire that you should keep your royal title and let me return to Champanagari." His obstinacy had a lizard-like singlemindedness. He humbly mumbled, "Karna, on the basis of your strength I dared to confront the Pandavas. If you turn your face away, I won't have a leg to stand on. Do you want to see the Crown Prince of the Kauravas cringeing with fear and running with his tail between his legs? If you leave Hastinapura, this bunch of Pandavas will make life for me impossible."

That is why they say that a friend in need is the only true friend. That was the only motivation that made me accept the kingdom of Anga. I sat on a throne, unwillingly yet stubbornly, a throne on which were spread the flaming iron-flowers of the humiliating shouts from thousands of mouths, "Charioteer's son! Charioteer's son!" I did not sit on the throne merely because I wanted a kingdom. Only I knew what untold sufferings I had borne—how

people had tried to crush me, and now these very same people were acknowledging me as the king of a sovereign land. How many nights had I spent in an agony of sleeplessness trying to guess what lay in my future! One thought continually pursued me, like a cow-fly pursuing a dog. If I were really a charioteer's son, why did I get so angry when addressed as a charioteer's son? Why couldn't I consider myself blessed as a charioteer's son? The instant I heard anyone say "Charioteer's son", why did my blood corpuscles bolt like enraged wild horses in my body? *Chhee!* What is the human mind anyway? Why does it stuff all kinds of swirling, fierce, topsy-turvy ideas in my body? I had no answers. Nor would I ever get any.

I knew very well that from the day of the competition people had started addressing me as the Raja of Anga. But that was lip service only, behind my back they probably still called me "Charioteer". Even death is preferable to insult in this world—yet I continued to allow myself to be addressed as "King of Anga". I sang a song of freedom though I swallowed the bitter draughts of contempt. If I continued to remain a charioteer, who would have respected me? As King of Anga, I had all heads bowing before me. I could achieve something in life only if I retained my Raja-of-Anga title. Take Anga-Raja away from Karna, and what remained except dust? Who respects dust? It's trodden upon. Like it or not, I had to take advantage of my Anga-Raja title. Only the freedom which the title gave me would show me a way out of the darkness. Life without freedom is a temple without an idol. My title was my freedom. In any form it comes, freedom is freedom. I would cherish it with my life's breath, because I knew that Raja Duryodhana would in no way interfere with the way I ruled Anga. That is why I considered myself free. My mind suggested to me that Duryodhana would always respect my wishes and implement my desires.

I would show haughty Bhima that the whip in my hand was not only for horses—it could be employed effectively against men like him as well. But I had to lie low for the time being. The poison of the insult had to be quietly digested. Flaming inside but calm outside. That was the way it had to be. It was my duty to accept the kingship of Anga. I had full faith that a day would come when I would with all my strength tighten my bow round the neck of huge-

bodied Bhima and shake him up thoroughly And prove that, though a charioteer, I was a valiant charioteer too It needed a little waiting There is a right time for everything

2

I was very happy these days—for an altogether different reason Messengers had taken my wedding invitation to everyone Wedding! Come to think of it, where would the world be without women and without marriage? A man's life would become insipid God's enchanting creation would deteriorate into a desert—full of rivers, fountains, birds and beasts, and lovely flowers of all kinds, of course—*but a desert nonetheless And love thirsty man would* wander helpless and lost in it, and ultimately in desperation start embracing trees and plants What would solace his atman then except suicide? That is why Woman always seemed to me to be the soft breath of Brahma exhaled in the first sweet slumber of cosmic creation That breath has the magical power of soothing male restlessness Man forgets the cruelty of the world in the love-filled ministrations of woman He patiently absorbs even the most vicious assaults of insult He can climb new heights of illustrious achievement Marriage is a pre-eminent stage in the pilgrimage of a man's life, a stage for which the young mind always yearns A river of beauty ecstatically merging in an ocean of accomplishment A sweet symphony of two youthful chords

That was why I could see nothing else I could see only my other half about to enter my life as my beloved Just as a honeybee buzzes over a favourite flower, my mind hovered over her imagined divinity I know that a warrior like me should not have sentiments like these But that is the way it was I was a man, after all A warrior's heart is not made of the same steel that fashions his useful arrows He has his feelings that tie him down What's a bow without a bow-string, and what's a man without feelings? And so the picture of my would-be wife floated always in front of my eyes, and my mind was crowded with teeming thoughts How would she behave with me? My nature, my life, my ambitions—would she be able to understand them rightly? And would she have the courage to tell me if she found any shortcomings in my character? Man is never perfect There are many unsuspected defects hidden in his nature From childhood he receives impressions of all kinds from

his environment, and these help him to develop They surface off and on, and it is imperative that husband and wife should know each other's frailties Married life is a two-wheeled chariot—the husband-wheel and the wife-wheel They have to move in harmony for the chariot to move at all Or it gets embedded in the earth Those who don't believe in this idea are obviously marrying for sexual pleasure only They saunter about in silk dresses, like beasts in fancy clothing Their culture is all show Their descendants are similarly hedonistic and foolish Like ant-heaps crushed under an elephant's foot, whole generations of their progeny are crushed by Time There is no special glory attached to the multitudinosity of ants, because they are infinitesimal and trivial My future wife's image stood in front of me A responsible husband, a duty-fulfilling raja both were equally important for me Vrishali was going to be my life-companion Satyasena would be my brother in-law A life-long bond was going to be established between a charioteer and a charioteer's daughter So her conch-shell lovely pure form danced constantly in front of my eyes With her help my life would become as safe as a sword sheathed in its scabbard In its scabbard a sword gathers no rust, it gets a more sharpened edge For me Vrishali was really the manifestation of the goddess Uma herself

How extraordinarily potent is the beauty of Woman! If we take the Creator to be a perfect artist, then Woman is his perfect painting After he has painted all the others, she becomes the final and climactic expression of his versatile brush

The very name "Vrishali' opens all my sweet memories like a bud blossoming under the soft influence of a breeze I feel sometimes that we should have absolute faith in Fate for the simple reason that on the screen of my memory many dramatic incidents flash often before my eyes

3

On the night of the competition I came across Satyasena on the bank of the Ganga I had told him to see me again Which he did, three days later I had discussed him with Raja Duryodhana Hardly had I suggested that he should be given a post in the army than he appointed Satyasena the royal charioteer The problem of Satyasena s livelihood was solved In a few days, he won

Duryodhana's favour by his excellent work I, father and Shon left the military academy and began living in the palace because I had been crowned King of Anga I had a separate palace, I had maids and servants, and above all I had the special love of Duryodhana All his other brothers also had deep affection for me

Though I had entered the palace, I continued my practice of going daily in the morning to the Ganga, from where I would return exactly at noon Before leaving, I would drink two glassfuls of cow's milk Offering puja to the Sun-God at the Ganga was my fixed habit

One day I happened to be at the bank of the Ganga I had finished my bath, and scooped a palmful of water for the *arghya* ritual On my right, about twenty steps away, was the river bank Its stone steps were dim in the soft, hazy dawn-light My *anjali* water fell drop by drop into the river and became one with the Ganga again I kept re-filling my empty *anjali* palm, and devotedly offering it to my guru

I have been reverently doing this over many years, and I intend to carry on doing this till the last day of my life Devotion is the green leaf on life's thorny tree The devotion that I had for my guru was something I cherished with all my heart, and I will continue to do so till I die All Hastinapura was fully aware of this Any citizen of Hastinapura, asked about my whereabouts at early dawn, would have only one answer "At the Ganga's bank "

As usual, I was filling the pot of my devotion with steady *anjalis* of water The east was slowly blushing a light pink A little later the golden emperor of the blue kingdom raced his chariot, pulled by a thousand sunrays for horses, and stood laughing atop the eastern horizon The birds and beasts welcomed him with sweet calls On the other bank of the Ganga the countless blades of soft green grass stretched their necks and stood up Green insects left their comfortable grassblade-beds and flitted about here and there Dewdrops glittered silvery on dry grass Swinging their strong necks, pretty calves gambolled on pasture land Flapping their wings, chirping birds deserted their nests to search for food A few *karandava* birds skimmed over the waters of the Ganga, and flapped away skyward with dripping wings Temple domes glowed golden The myriad waves of the Ganga, in spangly golden dresses, humming dance-melodies, performed circular choreographies All moving and unmoving life woke into consciousness and

throbbed The deathless world-illuminating mighty radiance of the Sun began to warm my flesh-ear-rings He spoke to me in an unknown language I opened my eyes and stared at him fixedly, taking all of him in Why was it that I never tired of drinking with my eyes the rich rasa of his radiance? I just could not understand Sometimes I had absorbed that radiance with my eyes all day—and yet I remained unsatisfied I myself was unable to analyse what kind of profound thirst I had It would probably elude me till the end of my days My pupils had become dilated as a result of this intense absorption of solar radiance Ashvatthaman was always telling me, "The shining gold and silver pupils in your blue eyes are like the sun and moon in the blue sky " My veneration of the Sun-God continued as before Singleminded staring at the intense orb often transported me into samadhi I even forgot my own body at such times My mind felt so light That day too I had the same experience, but suddenly an arrowy cry of distress pierced my ears, it came from the direction of the ghat A cry of mortal fear "Help! Help!" Immediately I turned my face towards the ghat No sign of human being anywhere on that huge ghat But I did see an upturned water pot bobbing on the Ganga's waves and disappearing in the distance A delicate hand, like a plantain stem, flailed in the silvery waters A bracelet glittered At times the hand vanished in the water While filling water from the ghat, a young girl had slipped on the scum and slid into the Ganga The deep waters of the Ganga, so attractive from a distance, were about to swallow up somebody The thrashing hands seemed to beg piteously for help

I tightened my dress, sprinted towards the ghat, and dived into the Ganga I swam, eyes open, for a while Tiny daring fish nibbled vainly at my ear-rings I saw a human shape drifting down in the waters As I came near, the shape clung hard to me How helpless man is when facing death He forgets all about caste, *gotra*, society, dharma, and achievement He thinks only of his own safety She was a girl—and yet she clung to a stranger It was the embrace of one human being, trapped in the noose of death, crying to another, "Save me " That embrace could have been fatal for me So the first thing I did was to break free and, grabbing as many tresses of her loose hair as I could, I swiftly cut across to the bank At that time a thought occurred to me My guru-puja had been cut short Slicing through the waters, I gazed up at the Sun

and silently said, "Guru-deva, forgive me Sometimes even a routine gets broken " I swam with the girl steadily and slowly I reached the bank, and awkwardly pulled her out, she was unconscious But the sight of her face stunned me For an instant I did not know what to do She was Vrishali, Satyasena's sister In a flash I recollected the confluence at Prayaga, and the incident when water from her pot had drenched my clothes, and how embarrassed she had been about it, and how she had glanced at me swiftly just once, and how after that she had stared at the ground so doggedly that she never raised her eyes again, and how she had scraped a whole hollow with her toe The Vrishali of that incident was like a shy bud veiling her face modestly from the caresses of the breeze And the Vrishali now was like a flower in full bloom on a branch She looked like a dew-drenched *parijata* blossom Her face was expressionless and calm, like that of a sleeping infant I felt as if I had rescued a water-nymph from the depths of the Ganga I stood there, gazing at the east, and holding her still body in the same hands that were used to offering *arghya* to the Sun A strange thought suddenly came to me Shouldn't the sunrise always be as enchanting as now? Vrishali should remain like this, in my arms, for ever, she wet, and I drenched and Time standing still and our reflections for ever shimmering in the constantly flowing water of the Ganga and the *karandava* birds singing their melodies for ever like this

But I shook off the thought as swiftly as a man flicks away a lizard that plops on his body I was upset After all, she was a stranger I gently lowered her still body on one of the stepping stones The water from her body dripped away into the Ganga What were these water drops saying to the Ganga? She remained unconscious for a few minutes Her wet dress clung to her body, and water drops gleamed on her round, fair lotus-face The refracted sun rays spread on her cheeks Her body creeper appeared to me be like a proud silvery current of the Ganga

I remembered placing my dry shawl on the bank I ran to fetch it Returning with it, I noticed that she had begun breathing lightly There was no one at the ghat I wiped the drops on her face with the shawl so gently that she did not even feel the movement of my fingers She moved her neck slightly and slowly opened her eyes She could not make out where she was and who I was With terrified eyes, she stared at me She noticed two water-drops slide

across my flesh-ear-rings on to my shoulders, and immediately she knew where she was and who I was She sat up with a jerk, and tried every way to rearrange her wet dress She lowered her head She rose carefully and wrapped my shawl around her as best she could Pointing to the fast-receding water pot, I said, "You broke a pot in Prayaga once, and now the Ganga has snatched a pot from you in Hastinapura for ever Ask the Ganga who she has snatched it for "

She glanced at the distant bobbing pot Shyly, with lowered head, she turned, climbed the steps and disappeared from sight Her wet feet left a trail of her path on the steps In her confusion she took my shawl with her Her confusion gave me considerable secret delight I kept staring at the vanishing pot in the Ganga for a long time Hearing the sound of someone descending the steps, I turned It was Grandsire Bhishma Seeing me, he said with great tenderness, "Karna, how is it you're still outside the Ganga today?"

I kept silent What could I say? How could I tell him that my sadhana had remained incomplete for some reason?

That day many citizens gazed with wonder at Karna returning from the Ganga with only a wet shawl draped around his shoulders

4

I had no idea how Duryodhana got wind of all that happened that day Very likely Vrishali told it to her brother, and he passed it on to Duryodhana Yes, from the time of that incident, my mind had taken a special colouring Every day I continued to go to the Ganga's bank, but when I looked up at the solar radiance, I saw Vrishali's face in it Sometimes I forgot my shawl on the bank and returned empty-handed—and then I had to ask Shon to fetch it for me Shon asked, "Bhaiya, why are you so forgetful these days?" I had to reply something, so I said, "Shon, sometimes it's fun to forget " This perplexed him and he would keep looking at me, because it was he who had to scurry to the Ganga every day in fierce heat I gave that errand to Shon because I did not want the palace menials to gossip about their absent-minded king

I had never disobeyed father, because I was the Raja of Anga only as a result of his sufferings As soon as I became king of

Anga, I brought him over to the palace, and assiduously carried out his least wish. Each night I personally rubbed sandalpaste ointment on his tired, burning feet. Seeing this, mother would sometimes say, "Vasu, you're a raja now. This doesn't suit you any more. Get yourself a sweet maharani and leave it all to her." I never responded to her suggestion. I would cleverly shift the conversation to chit-chat about Champanagari.

One day father gave me quite a shock.

Shon came and informed that father wanted me on some very urgent business. I rushed to his room. Raja Duryodhana was already there. As soon as I entered, father put this question to me: "Karna, I have never asked anything from you till now. If I were to ask something from you today, will you agree?"

I couldn't make out clearly what he meant. But it was my duty to fulfil his desire. So I immediately replied, "Pita-ji, I am your son Karna. A father doesn't ask a son, he commands."

"In that case, I want a daughter-in-law. I have made up my mind to get you married. I want no excuses."

"But..." I demurred.

"Look, no buts, please. I have selected a lovely charioteer's daughter for you."

"Pita-ji... My..."

"Not one word more. I am despatching a *purohita* this very day to the girl's parents."

"Can't you wait a few days, please?" I asked my last question. I don't know why but Vrishali's image started dancing in front of my eyes. It was not easy for me to forget her, because I went to the Ganga daily and she had become a daily remembrance. There was only way of preventing her memory from appearing: and that was not to go to the bank of the Ganga. But that was unthinkable. I would rather give up the title of Raja of Anga, I would rather give away my flesh-ear-rings and flesh-mail. I would never not go to the Ganga to worship the Sun-God.

"Look, Karna, we can't wait even a day more. We have to think of Shon's marriage too. And we are not getting any younger. If this marriage is not to your liking then say so plainly," was father's ultimatum. I was at a complete loss. Was I becoming an obstacle in Shon's life? Was it right to bring pain to the love-filled hearts of my old father and mother who had borne such hardships for my sake? They say a man lives on feelings, but sometimes duty

requires that feelings be pushed in the background That man is truly human who lives for others Briefly invoking the Sun-God, I made up my mind I said humbly, "If that is your wish, I am ready to comply "

"All right," he said, and approached me His old eyes sparkled with a very special enthusiasm He ran his trembling hand lovingly on my back Suddenly I recalled Vrishali's plantain-stem-like, fair-complexioned, shapely hand I steeled my mind to forget everything, but, *chhee*, the mind is so uncontrollable What a man wants so desperately to forget, exactly that keeps revolving in his mind Perhaps that is life's way of severely testing human beings When has it ever happened that what appears so delightful and good to a person gets actually implemented in life? Vrishali had appeared delightful and good to me— but now I had to forget her There was no way that she could be my wife now I said, "I am leaving," and turned to go, because I did not want my inner feelings to be exposed in front of my father I had forgotten that Raja Duryodhana was sitting there He saw me about to leave, and asked father a poignant question "But, Uncle Adhiratha, who is this girl? What's her name? You haven't said a word about that "

My ears pricked up Father replied, "The girl is in Hastinapura Satyasena's sister Vrishali "

'I see! She! Good Why should the Ganga be needlessly hurt every day—that's what made you decide, did it?" Duryodhana laughed out loud as he said this, and father joined him I was startled So this was all a machination of Duryodhana's How intelligent he was! He knew that it was the right thing to approach father in order to get me to agree—and that was the way he finally managed it He was not only my friend, but almost a blood brother, almost like Shon It was a sin even to doubt his love He made me Raja of Anga only because he loved me with a pure love, but I had nonetheless thought of him as self seeking I made up my mind then and there that I would do everything in my power for Duryodhana I had two brothers now—Shon and Duryodhana I started loving even more than life itself the excellent Kaurava, Raja Duryodhana himself, because he had lavished so much care on the gentle sensibility of a simple charioteer's son like me

Without saying a word, I came out of the room I was ecstatic Vrishali was going to be my wife Outside the palace Shon was waiting, his face turned in the other direction I thumped him hard

on the back Startled, he burst out angrily, "Don't be silly!" But as soon as he saw me he bit his tongue and stood before me with folded palms and bowed head, like a regular culprit I took his folded palms in mine and said, "Silliness is over, Shon You won't have to go to the Ganga again and again any more to fetch my shawl "

Shon kept staring at me in wonder

5

I was overjoyed

My wedding invitation was sent to all the neighbouring kings It was supposed to be given to all present in the arena on that day My life was like a huge blossoming deodar Day by day it grew higher From charioteer to king, and now in an auspicious direction with the right companion —was this not a fortune-favoured journey? Happiness sometimes fans a person with numerous wings Sometimes the happiness is so excessive that it becomes suffocating, and then one's mind warns "Enough! No more happiness!"

Standing on the balcony, I thought all this I could clearly see the distant horizon where the vast blue sky was embracing the green land My mind was in raptures Watching the maids and male servants busily decorating the wedding pavilion in front of the ancient palace of the Kurus, I felt extraordinarily light of heart, almost like a breeze My heart seemed to sail proudly in my body-lake like the milk- drinking royal swans preening their neck-feathers in the palace pond The happy dreams of my future life spread all around me The whole world was as happy and pure as a temple

6

The auspicious festivity of my wedding ended, it was the talk of the city and it excited everyone to the very pinnacle of joyful eagerness I couldn't even imagine that my wedding would be celebrated with such pomp and splendour I entered the role of householder as a responsible husband The second act of my life-drama commenced, an act filled with romance and parental affection, an act that pulls a man's mind to itself so much that the mind

gets stuck in a groove. Marriage makes all things and all happenings roseate. It is the spring song of life's music. It was this raga that I had now to play, because I was now a married man. I still recall many of the incidents of that marriage ceremony. Spring goes, but the scent of the *vakula* stays—something like that.

Many eminent citizens—and of course royalty—came to my wedding. An extraordinary event—that royal Kshatriyas should deign to be present at the wedding of a charioteer's son. Raja Duryodhana had sent special invitations to all. What limitless affection he had for me! Once a Kaurava raja gives word, he always keeps it—this was revealed in every act of his. All who came from other kingdoms to my wedding in Hastinapura felt that they were witnessing the wedding of a Kaurava prince. I was fortunate indeed And as for Shon, his joy exceeded all limits. He forgot his age, and went about like an adult all over the pavilion personally asking everyone what they wanted and what more he could do for their convenience and comfort

Ashvatthaman, who was always discussing for hours on end such profound matters as dharma, atman and duty, enthusiastically participated in my wedding With his pure hands he placed the garland round my neck, and while doing so said gently, "Beware, Karna! No heart remains unvanquished in marriage "

While applying turmeric some of the ladies giggled, "What need of turmeric on the body of this god of a bridegroom? His skin is more golden than turmeric " I remember those words clearly

I was married at *sandhya* time, during the cowdust hour of *godhuli* Vrishali shyly placed a garland of pure-white lotuses round my neck The sweet strains of shehnai and drums echoed all over the capital Sandal water and the scents of the night filled the air with intoxicating fragrance The Sun-God tarried at the western horizon to give me his blessings Thinking *I will not be able to find time from my rituals to peacefully* namaskara *him at night*, I *pranama-ed* him at the altar itself I was now a married man—a four-armed human

I was flooded with presents, mostly ornaments, and silk dresses, gold and silver-hilted swords, mother-of-pearl, rubies, pearls and emeralds But one present was unique The Pandavas sent only one gift from the Queen Mother Kunti A blue sari, and a lizard-skin finger-protector The sari had golden embroidery—a magnificent and precious present

I and Vrishali bowed and *pranama-ed* Radha-mata and father They blessed us "Live for ever " Our hearts filled with joy I felt that it was worthwhile to have been born as their son Raising me up by my arm, Radha-mata said, "Karna, be happy " I took her chapped, old hand in mine and said, "Not Karna, mother, Vasu For the world I am Karna, but for you I am Vasu and will always be Vasu " My eyes were moist She clasped me to her heart For an instant I rested my head on mother's shoulder I could see clearly, in the palace window in front, the Queen Mother Kunti Devi She seemed to be looking in my direction I saw her wiping her eyes with her *anchal* Or was it that my tear-moist, blurred eyes got that impression? Why should the Queen Mother wipe her eyes with her *anchal*? The next instant the palace window was closed The sunrays falling on the slats faded and disappeared I took Vrishali's hand in mine Her hand would now be my true companion in the crises I faced in the world

The wedding of the charioteer's son who challenged Arjuna to combat in the arena went off with tremendous success—did the Queen Mother Kunti Devi not wish to see this? Was this the reason she closed her palace window so quickly? This thought entered my mind

7

So many things happen in the course of life No matter how hard he tries, no man can keep track of everything that has happened But there are some incidents which remain in the memory, however hard one tries to shake them off Like a crocodile that refuses to leave its victim, the mind refuses to disremember such incidents *Many fine silk cloths, and many rough and ready dresses,* are packed in that casket of memory Has a wife or a husband ever forgotten the first sweet union on the night of their marriage? Ah! All good memories are normally fragrant like flowers, but the memory of that night is as intoxicatingly heady as the scent of the pandanus blossom That night is a blend of hesitation, infatuation, and self-offering That night signifies a silent and unconscious communication of two minds *Chhee!* How can words portray that night? If there is any real aim in the *yajna* of Creation intended for man and woman, it may be said that the wedding night is the

fulfilment of that aim I still remember that night vividly, as if it had occurred only yesterday The special thing was it was a full moon night of autumn

Vrishali was sitting shyly on a bed of black shisham wood which was decorated with the white fragrant blossoms of the creeper called queen of-the-night As soon as I entered the bedroom, she rose, adjusting her dress She stood with head bowed I also did not know what to say I went and stood near the window, from where I had a clear view of the full moon flooding the earth liberally with silver light All Hastinapura was silent Soft cool breezes from the Ganga slipped inside the room, as if asking me, "Have you forgotten the Ganga? Wasn't it the Ganga who first saw the two of you embrace each other?" I gazed at the vast expanse of the Ganga Her flow, in the distant moonlight, appeared like a somersaulting *girahabaja* pigeon That day, when Vrishali lay unconscious on the steps of the ghat, I had felt as I felt now I gently shut the window, went near the bed, and said, "If ever you happen to slip into the Ganga again, I'm not going to rescue you I'm not a fisherman who goes about saving drowning girls " I could see her silently enjoying my joke, and she tried to suppress herself but two charming dimples formed on her cheeks She kept quiet She stood there as before, veiling her face I went on, ' There are far too many stone statues in this palace anyway There s no need for you to be an extra one How long are you going to stand there petrified? Come sit here " Face still veiled, she sat down As she sat, I saw the gold zari flowers on her sari glitter I was puzzled It was the sari presented by the Queen Mother Why had she chosen to wear that sari? I asked her curiously, "Vrishali, why did you choose this sari? What's so special about it? ' My sari related arrow hit right on target—she broke her silence

'I had heard that you like gazing at the golden sun in the blue sky This blue sari has golden zari work That's why " She said this in the softest voice, like sweet cow bells tinkling I was hearing her speak for the first time Even more than her sweet voice, I was impressed by what she said

God alone knew what other personal details she had picked up about me!

I was about to lift her chin and say something when she pulled out a folded cloth from under the bedcover and pushed it towards

me. I looked at it curiously. It was my shawl. She had in the confusion that day taken it with her, and carefully stored it. I shook it open. Something fell out. Surprised, I bent and picked it up. A lizard-skin finger-protector. Vrishali's sharpness amazed me. Knowing her husband's prowess as an archer, she had brought for me the finger-protector gifted by the Queen Mother Kunti Devi. I slipped the protector on. The oddness of the coincidence struck me. Why had Vrishali chosen only those gifts that had come from the Queen Mother? Try however hard I did, no answer was forthcoming. Well, there is never an answer to everything that happens in a man's life, is there? I just let the matter be.

I drapped the shawl around Vrishali's shoulders and head and pulled her with it towards me. I said, "I suppose all wives know instinctively right from birth what pleases their husbands."

"But what has my husband-god brought for his darling wife, that's what I'd like to know," she said softly, resting her head on my chest.

I opened my silk cummerbund and showed her the shards of the pot broken at the confluence in Prayaga. "This gold, from Prayaga."

She snatched it from my hands. She blushed, and hid her face against my chest. I cupped her fair, round-as-a-crownface in my hands. We embraced tightly. She looked at the *ingudi*-lamps and said, "Uh-huh, we're not alone." I laughed, released her face, and rose from the bed. I blew out all the lamps one by one, and returned to the bed. Embracing her, I said, "No one's watching us now."

"Not all lamps are out yet," she retorted. I couldn't understand her clearly. A mischievous ray of moonlight had glided in from the window slat. I realised she was referring to that. Looking casually at the moonbeam I said, "Are you referring to the distant moon up in the sky? *Aji*, who knows how many lovefilled nights this moon has witnessed since the beginning of creation? The moon must have lost count of them all." But I wasn't pleased at all at the sight of that interfering moon-ray.

"Uh-huh, not the moon. There are two other lamps that shame the silver light of the moon, lamps that never dim. You can't snuff them out with your lips, that kind of lamp," she said, gazing at me with her large eyes.

"Which ones?" I asked teasingly. It wasn't difficult to guess what she meant.

"Your ears," she laughed softly

Again those enchanting dimples

"*Wah!* Vrishali, how did you become so clever?" I took her face in my hands The bluish-silvery glow of my flesh ear-rings fell on her fair, round face, and her cheeks took on a bluish-white shade I couldn't find a metaphor to describe how they looked, though I tried my hardest The bright full moon climbed slowly up the sky with Arundhati, his companion star The soft cool breezes of the Ganga wafted through the half-closed window A thrill ran through me

8

I passed my days happily with Vrishali She was an ideal wife Not just wife—perfect too as sister, daughter, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law Her behaviour made me completely forget the fact that there was a time when I was insulted in this city For the first time I realised how ecstatic, romantic, and feelingful life can be It is not possible to experience the joy of actuality by reading books on it or by reading the Puranas One has to live it to feel it There was only one quality in Vrishali's behaviour— and that was the feeling of pure love Love is indeed the supreme inspiration of life The red, black and blue colours of insult, revenge and jealousy fade and vanish when placed beside the pure white of love

More than half of my day used to be spent beside the bank of the Ganga The remainder was spent in exercise, in the royal court, and chatting with Ashvatthaman and Duryodhana The nights were fragrant with Vrishali's presence In fact, there was no such thing as night for me All was day Twentyfour hours of light! Life was lavishly heaping golden flowers on me! There were loving friends around me who were totally dedicated to me my parents, Vrishali, Satyasena, Ashvatthaman, Shon, and Raja Duryodhana Shon was a strapping youth now Tall, slim, handsome as a wild pandanus Exercise and a healthy passion-free outlook had made him firm and strong His affectionate nature endeared him to everyone All thought him to be both physically powerful and gentle But for me he remained the same innocent little boy, because his discretion, soft-spokenness, and friendly manifesta-

tions at every step remained the same as they always were. His body had changed—become larger—but his mind remained as it was, pure as snow.

I used to look at him sometimes thinking it was he who possessed the flesh-ear-rings and coat-of-mail. He looked exactly like me at those times. Sometimes he looked even better than me, the only shortcoming being that his complexion was on the darker side. How did he feel knowing that he did not have the ear-rings and mail I had? In boyhood he would even fight to get them. What were his feelings now regarding me? Envy, jealousy, hatred? *Chhee!* I never noticed any such hints in his behaviour. He was the unparalleled example of gentle brotherly love—such was my Shon! Duryodhana had ninetynine brothers, Arjuna four, but I had only one. Not brother—another Karna! When I became a raja, many people sweetly asked for material benefits and land from me, but what did Shon ask? Half of the kingdom of Anga? Wealth? Ministership? Or generalship? No. He met me alone and said, "Bhaiya, you are now really big. I am happy. I want always to be near you. Make me the charioteer of your white-horsed chariot. Promise you will!"

Such unselfish love! I remember how my throat choked when I heard his demand. I took his hand in mine and pressed it. Who was so lucky as to get a gentle, loving brother like Shon? In childhood I used to get pointlessly frustrated asking myself, "Who am I?" Wasn't I Shon's loved brother? Now I had deep-as-life friends like Ashvatthaman and Duryodhana. I had loving parents, an understanding and lovely wife, the untrammelled kingship of Anga. What more happiness can a man even imagine? But—but there was still an unsatisfied corner in my heart. I was unfulfilled, I was discontented. After all, what was I but a son of a charioteer? Of course, I shouldn't have been upset by my caste, but I was. Why? I didn't know. Sometimes I got this fierce urge to drive away with Shon in a chariot and go to Champanagari beside the bank of the Ganga. I wanted Shon to collect seashells there. I wanted myself to gaze at the sun from the chariot. Twilight would come. While returning home, I wanted Shon to gaze at the *garuda* birds and ask me the same question, "Bhaiya, are you going to fly like the king of birds Garuda—higher and still higher." And I would reply, "Yes. So high that you won't be able even to see me."

But this was not to be. It was never to be. There's no going back in life.

9

Raja Duryodhana and I used to discuss political matters regularly Whenever the Pandavas were mentioned, his pink eyes changed into strange colours Uncle Shakuni was invariably present He would come up with many daring plans, and cleverly explain how to overcome the risks involved before implementing them I smelled trickery in whatever he said, and always firmly opposed him And Uncle Shakuni would say, "Karna, you know next to nothing of politics You see everything through your eyes—and that's a mistake Politics is not for guileless, sensitive minds It needs cunning The world says, 'Language expresses feelings ' But politics says, 'Language should conceal feelings.' The mind of a man well-versed in politics should be like the burrow of a bandicoot No one knows where the hole starts and where it goes; similarly no one should know what's in a cunning politician's mind Politics is not meant to be discussed in temples, in front of the general public "

These views of his confused me I compared Ashvatthaman describing the mind as a divine fruit with Uncle Shakuni describing it as a bandicoot hole I couldn't make out anything Why has nature given the gift of life to man? To immolate himself in order to illuminate the world, or to exploit others at the least opportunity for his own brief benefit? Will man never be able to live in peace and love? What is the basic nature of man? Love or cruelty? Even if it is cruelty, surely man is not to blame for it One can argue that it is Nature which gave him the quality of cruelty Ashvatthaman always said, "The atman always resides in the body " So are cruelty, envy, jealousy, revenge all expressions of the atman? If so, why does the world blame humans who are affected by such emotions? Or are they all figments of the imagination? If so, how can love, renunciation and self-discipline be expressions of the atman?

The mind!

A one-syllabled word—yet what a mighty multitude of mysteries are concentrated in it What is this thing called mind? Every human being is an elephant trapped by the myriad ropes of the mind Always vacillating, always worried, but in spite of that thinking itself free and capable And what is this thing called mind, anyway? Isn't it just a crab with thousands of stinging feelings?

A frisky crab that burrows its claws in the surrounding sand, and coordinatedly drags the middle part of its body forward. Aren't man's feelings the same? Love, envy, renunciation, greed, affection, reproach, maternal attachment, anger—these are the stings of the mind, each in its field restless in its own way, and yet pulling the body along carefully forward. Where? No one knows. Even Ashvatthaman cannot fathom that astonishing mystery.

Listening to Uncle and Nephew talking, I would stare fixedly at my feet. My silence did not escape Duryodhana. He approached me, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Karna, are you annoyed? It's clear you are annoyed because you are staring at your feet. You're lost in deep thought. When I see you stare at your feet in this fashion, I am reminded of a happy incident narrated by Purochana."

'Which?" I asked, surprised.

"My assistant Purochana has wormed his way into the goodwill of the Pandavas for my sake. He reports all their activities to me. He informed to me once that Yudhishthira often tells his brothers that Karna's feet resemble the Queen Mother Kunti's."

' The things you say, Raja!" I looked at him with a start and then looked at my feet. I was surprised to see that they tapered in the front. Were they really like the Queen Mother's? It could very well be. Can't there be two of a thing in the world?

"Look, Karna, this is cunning Yudhishthira's trick. Today he says your feet resemble his mother's. Tomorrow he'll say there's a relation between you and the Queen Mother. He might even make you out as a brother of the Pandavas. You can't trust him.'

'King, you think I'm no better than a suckling baby? Radhamata is my only mother, and she is dearer to me than life itself. Karna is ready to give his life for three things: one, my mother, Radha, two, devotion to the Sun-God, and three, my word," I promptly assured Duryodhana.

No matter what a man is, he must always protect his dignity. Mother, word given, and dharma—these three are the supreme pillars of human dignity. These are such that they deserve even the sacrifice of one's life at the right time.

10

I learnt all this in the sweet and noble company of Ashvatthaman. His every word was like nectar. His father knew about the art of weapons and strict social norms—and nothing

else But Ashvatthaman seemed to me to be a repository of all virtues To me he was the finest, most enterprising and clear-visioned traveller on life's road—and yet a modest traveller. He was a brave warrior, an affectionate friend, an obedient son, and a connoisseur of the pleasures of Nature How subtly he had connected the small details of everyday life to the larger pattern of living His silence was interpreted by some as revealing his useless purposelessness This was not acceptable to me How could Ashvatthaman be without purpose? Of course, it did seem that he had no goal But it was also correct to say that he had in a simple way absorbed all the goals of life in his many-faceted personality I had seen him at very close quarters We had talked for hours on end Some said that Guru Drona had never given him the opportunity to grow fully According to them, he was a meagre mushroom in the massive shade of the Drona banyan How unjust and one-sided these views were! Nobody in the Capital had truly understood Ashvatthaman I always saw him as a totally distinct and free personality I had seen no other person in Hastinapura with an individuality as free and admirable as Ashvatthaman's At times he seemed to me to excel even Guru Drona As tall as a white Himalayan peak, as liberal as the wide flow of the Ganga

One day I set out at dawn for the bank of the Ganga, and met Ashvatthaman on the way He was in a hurry, a white shawl was thrown across his shoulder His face was as happy as a freshly-blossomed lotus, and he was carrying a wild fig tree sacrificial pot containing fuel for the ritual He was probably hurrying to the military academy to perform his early morning *havana* Seeing him, I stopped my chariot I had taken to driving to the bank in a chariot after my coronation Normally Shon was my charioteer, but this time I drove alone to the Ganga I said to Ashvatthaman, "What a stroke of rare good luck! Guru-son, your darshan has filled my day with happiness Who knows, I might meet today some guest who I had not expected to meet in my wildest dreams!"

He laughed and said, "Is my darshan so auspicious to you? In that case, I'll come here every day and sit and await your presence "

"I know you won't do it, but your darshan is certainly auspicious, there's no doubt of that Are you coming with me to the bank of the Ganga?" I asked

"No, Karna It's time for my *havana* I have to go I have to reach this sacred fuel in time " He said this, lifting the small bundle of sacred sticks

"Oh, just that, is it? Come, I'll reach these sticks, and we'll together go to the Ganga Come inside the chariot," I asked him He had no way of refusing me He climbed in, and we drove towards the military academy The birds had started sweetly chirping Like the wheels of the chariot, many memories revolved in my mind It is my experience that there is a close connection between speed and memory, or why should memories invariably crowd in upon us when we are in fast-moving vehicles? I recalled my father Adhiratha, so I asked my guru's son, "Tell me clearly, what are your views on the relationship of father and son?"

He said with natural ease, "The sun's reflection falls in the river waters, and a father's reflection falls similarly on his son Life is endless—and a father is re-born in his son, as it were This is the story of birth that has gone on continuously without a break since the beginning of time "

"I see And what is your personal experience?"

"Mine? Karna, I have a very distinct experience, but I have kept it to myself, not finding anyone till now worthy or repeating it to Today I will recount it to you "

"Well then, go ahead "

He said it in a voice that seemed to suggest the imparting of some profound secret "My father has taught all the arts of war to the Pandavas and the Kauravas You already know this But he has taken care to see that they did not succeed in grasping his teachings fully He kept even the excellent archer Arjuna literally in the dark for many days How? I'll tell you My father used to send Arjuna daily to the Ganga to fetch water in a narrow necked pot All had to perform this chore, but he ensured that I received a wide-necked pot With the result that I was always the first to return to the academy with a filled pot Before the Pandavas and Kauravas turned up, my father used to give me special instruction in the mighty Narayana weapon "

"So you know how to wield the Narayana weapon?"

"Yes Later Arjuna learnt its use also He caught on to father's ruse, and harassed him till he was taught the weapon's use No one but us two knows how to use it "

"What has all this to do with the relationship of father and son, Ashvatthaman ? ' I reminded him of my original question

"Only this—that a father can do everything for his son Even tell a lie if need arises But though two of us know the use of the Narayana weapon, we have not been able to come up to your excellence in archery Tell me, Karna, where did you learn it?" he counter-questioned me

'My father Ashvatthaman, I am a charioteer's son Who else would teach me? Isn't it true that a father can do everything for his son? So let it be known that my father Adhiratha taught me all I know "

"Your father is fortunate, Karna," he said, placing his hand on my shoulder

By this time the east had flooded with light The Sun God tore through darkness and climbed to the sky We kept chatting until we arrived at the military academy Ashvatthaman handed over the sacred fuel to a rishi's son We turned to go to the Ganga Usually I went alone, today there were two of us My mind was filled with the Narayana weapon In a short time we reached the Ganga I was a little delayed for my daily ritual Every day I would stand waist deep in the water well before sunrise Today the sun had risen and I was still outside the water I leapt out of the chariot Ashvatthaman also got down The smiling golden rays of the morning were all around us I am always very troubled by the fact that sunrays are without shape Had they an embodied form, I would have completely taken them within me Had they fragrance, I would have completely smelled them Had they voice like humans, I would have talked with him hour after hour And yet I know I would have remained unsatisfied I cannot explain why I used to feel like this But it is a fact that I did feel that way

"Karna, didn't I tell you a little while ago that life is endless? I feel that truth intensely when I come to the bank of the Ganga," Ashvatthaman said as he descended from the chariot

"How's that?" I asked, watching the golden sunrays play on his lips Sunrays, glancing off the water and flickering on his face, imparted a rich glow to his haunting, intense black eyes

"See, on the opposite bank—the dewdrops sparkling on the grass!" He pointed gracefully in that direction

"Yes," I replied, "Last night Uma and Shankar must have visited this place, and you know how they love to play hide-and-seek While playing Uma's pearl necklace probably snapped, and after the game was over she must have glanced in the direction of

the opposite bank, and saying 'You always have this personal grudge against me', she must have complained lovingly to Shankar Then came the dawn, and Uma must have hastily retrieved as many pearls as she could before day broke and run away, holding her husband's hand The leftover pearls are the ones you see shining now These dewdrops smilingly tell the golden rays of the morning sun about the secret gambols of Shiva and Parvati at night " Enjoying my own high-flying imagination, I glanced at him

"No, Karna, you're mistaken Why should Shiva and Parvati leave Kailasa mountain and come here? And where do you think jewel-less Parvati will ever get a necklace of pearls when she has to *consort with a bhang-drunk husband like Shiva?" He said this* calmly, gazing straight at the dewdrops

"You tell me, then, what these dewdrops are"

"Karna, these dewdrops are excellent symbols of human existence *Arre*, why dewdrops only—every thing in Nature has been placed there by the Creator in order that man can learn some lesson or other from it True, one has to see with an open mind, a pure mind *Then only will one realise that the world is a grand*, enormous schoolroom where God teaches lessons, and then only will one become an enthusiastic, studious prober of the innermost secrets of the created universe "

"Ashvatthaman, I still remember once you compared man's life to the fruit of the gods And now you say that man's life is comparable to dewdrops You mind clarifying this a little?"

"Look, Karna, who knows where these dewdrops come from and where they disappear That's the human condition as well No one can tell where man comes from and where he goes And let me tell you why this is so These dewdrops shine with borrowed light, and each dewdrop seems to be a miniature sun by itself These shining dewdrops sway with each passing breeze They scatter their borrowed light far away from themselves They delight all who gaze at them *But the instant even a slightly strong wind* blows, these happy dewdrops trickle away into countless drops of water mingling in the dust And all without so much as even a squeak of protest or complaint

"That's man's story too All living creatures are countless manifestions of a single Divinity—*arre, it could even be said that some* creatures are so divine that they appear to be God All these

creatures have to live in this world The light of their exertions irradiates the world Brief moments of joy delight them, and they succumb quietly to the arrival of death That's been the story of generation after generation The dust-destroyed dewdrops become dewdrops again on blades of grass the next day, similarly dead humans assume new appearances in succeeding re-births Life is endless Now you know why I keep repeating this all the time "

"What you say is right Ashvatthaman But it does seem to me that there are men who don't quite fit in your category of humans-as dewdrops They never get a chance to swing on the wings of joy, they are never very brilliant in achievement They are walking corpses What about these? You have very beautiful ideas on life comparing human beings to dewdrops, but life is not all that sweet and pretty—nor all that simple "

"No, Karna The people you have in mind are also dewdrops The only difference is that they cling to the other side of the grass blades The sun's divine rays just don't get a chance to reach them They are always bereft of light These are the dewdrops that languish for ever in the darkness of ignorance And it is true that even death is not as cruel in this world than ignorance "

'Ah, when can one expect these dewdrops to receive light ? When will the Sun shine in the lives of such people? When will they raise their pinnacles of success and achievement?"

'At the threshold of Death For those who wallow in ignorance, there is no simpler, fairer, and more truth-loving guru than Death There is no other way of salvation for them "

"So you mean to say that they should commit suicide as soon as possible? '

"Of course not We have no right to destroy a life that we have not created Suicide is the rape of the atman by an emotionally over excited mind "

' What good are these men for, then ? Should they carry on existing till they die, or should they as living corpses carry on living a mock-life?"

"No, these men should learn lessons from the patient earth They should increase their shakti and bravely accept countless assaults, as she does Not physical, financial, and worldly shakti—but spiritual strength And when the right time comes, they should merge into the infinite, departing with all the experi-

ences of the atman You see, no one should ever forget that Time is seamless, indivisible Life is not something you get by begging for it Life is an endless journey from a beginningless beginning to an endless end "

Nonplussed, I stared at him Sparks of wisdom seemed to flash from him Yet he appeared totally serene

I had completely forgotten that I was late in entering the water Placing my hand on his shoulder, I said to him gently, "Friend, sometimes I get confused by all kinds of conflicting ideas I don't get a chance to stick to one clear thought Who am I?—even that I don't clearly know Why do I have this strange mental conflict? Why do I feel this disequilibrium? When will this dichotomy get resolved? When will I become a Karna who's the same outside as well as inside ? *One* Karna A Karna desirable to all A Karna shining in his own splendour A Karna who knows himself intimately '

Looking at me with great affection, he interrupted me, "Karna, you were born with flesh ear rings, so you must have an exceptionally illustrious and ancient ancestry But you mustn't go about emptily singing the praises of your brilliant background Pin your faith in the present Your future is not a future that emerges from the womb of high ancestry Don't be misled by foolish ideas of noble background Don't jeopardise your present by speculations about your past A person who once decides that life has no limits can never be dejected He will never lose faith in himself He will never imitate foolish trend setters He will not fritter his time away in trivial pleasures In the event that he does, then no matter how brave he is, no matter how aristocratic and mighty his lineage, he will inevitably work out his own doom His so called excellent lineage will be all wiped out The world will brand him ignorant, spirit less, and senile There will be none to sing his praises If any write his praise, none will read it That is why, Karna, I keep telling you that if you have lost yourself in this kind of inner conflict, please snap out of it immediately Do some self-searching and make up your mind who you are I have full faith that you singly can show the world the right path The day your inner conflict ceases, the world will fall at your feet—because you have that kind of greatness in you " His eyes were steady and calm A mysterious, unique radiance seemed to emanate from his fair, round face I felt in his words a deep, eternal truth

His unbiased, lucid advice doubled my respect for him. There are any number of flatterers in the world, and very few fault-indicaters Extremely rare are path-showers Some of his words resounded in my ears "Your lineage is illustrious. . Pin your faith in the present Don't brood over the future because that's silly. . Divine message to the world "

Taking his hand in mine, I said, "Ashvatthaman, I'm going to tell you something today which I have never told anyone till now. I have no other guru than the Sun-God who has taught me all about archery He always gives me divine instruction I can follow him perfectly The only problem is that I cannot communicate with him through language Any impossible task I do, is done only with the help of his advice " I said this, pointing to the sky.

Both of us *namaskara-ed* that radiant treasure Some words of Ashvatthaman were ringing in my ears "Time is seamless, indivisible, Life is endless " One question had been on my lips for a long time, but I had not dared to ask him I stubbornly resolved to go ahead with it today He always had a white cloth tied round his head, knotted under the chin Was it a wonder or what? At least that's what I suspected I plucked up courage and asked him while we were on our way back after the *arghya*-offering, "Ashvatthaman, why do you always cover your head? Are you allergic to sunlight?"

"No, it's not that at all On the contrary, I have the greatest attraction for sunlight and the waters of the Ganga Why I cover my head—that's something I'll tell you later, not today, later, at the right time I certainly will, no doubt of that "

11

From the bank of the river we returned to the palace. Ashvatthaman went to the military academy As soon as I reached the palace, I heard an important piece of news Krishna had killed his uncle Kansa, the king of the Yadavas of Mathura Kansa was a tyrannical and unjust ruler He had smashed on a stone the heads of the seven infant brothers of Krishna It is true that a selfish man is like a tigress who has just calved That tigress satisfies her unbearable hunger by devouring even her own new-born And that is exactly what a self-loving man does He is blinded to all thoughts of mine and thine when he sacrifices others at the altar of

his desires. Such a man was Kansa. Every day in the palace we heard tales brought by messengers describing his brutalities. He had gone to the extent of reducing to pulp the buttersoft heads of his infant nephews by hammering them on a stone slab. His demonic tendencies, expressed in mad unjustices, had terrorised all the citizens of Mathura. Finally Sri Krishna was forced to kill him. He pummelled Kansa with his fists till his uncle was flung flat on the ground. That is always the way injustice ends. Kirtiman, Sushena, Bhadrasena, Riju, Sammardana and Bhadra—Krishna took a horrific revenge for these brothers of his.

I had heard all kinds of stories about Krishna from all kinds of people. Some mocked him as a cowherd's son, some described him as the "friend" of the cowgirl Radha, some said he was the bosom friend of the impecunious Brahmin Sudama, and still others called him simply the "flute player". I had never seen him in person, but I certainly had an uncontrollable desire to do so. As the maternal uncle of the Pandavas, he was bound to come to Hastinapura sooner or later. I could make up my mind about him only after I had met him and talked to him at least a couple of times. Whatever he must have seemed to others, he always appeared to me as the exemplary raja of the Yadavas—upset by injustice, the freer of society from the clutches of oppression, a very easy mixer with the lower strata of society, and a victor who killed his own wicked uncle and, unmoved by greed, established Kansa's father Ugrasena on the throne of Mathura.

Such a self-abnegating hero was naturally loved by the subjects. Though Ugrasena was technicallly the ruler of Mathura, in reality the problem-ridden people had placed the royal responsibility in the hands of Sri Krishna. Not even a leaf in Mathura stirred without the approval of Sri Krishna.

12

A wave of enthusiasm ran through Hastinapura with the news of Sri Krishna's victory. The citizens thronged the city squares, excitedly and delightedly discussing the extraordinary exploit of Sri Krishna. Some even hung up victory-festoons on lintels and archways.

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The minister Vrishavarman announced to all the nobles in the palace that Maharaja Dhritarashtra had summoned a royal assem-

bly that night This was the first royal assembly after my coronation as the Raja of Anga A unanimous resolution had to be passed that would make even stronger the deep ties that existed between the Kauravas and the Yadavas as a result of the familial connection via Kunti—and this was to be done by the Queen Mother Kunti sending a present to Sri Krishna, her nephew This would also be the occasion for all to offer their congratulations to Sri Krishna Mathura was the prosperous kingdom of the Yadavas, of course, but it also happened to be contiguous with Hastinapura The Kauravas wished to establish strong and cordial connections with such a powerful relation This was also expedient from the political point of view

Kettledrums sounded all over the capital The special finely-woven orange pennant of the Kauravas which had been safely preserved was now taken out and hoisted on the pure-white roof of the palace where it fluttered in proud saffron glory Its excited flapping seemed to vibrate with the speed of wind from Hastinapura's palace to announce to the Yadavas of Mathura, "Your new raja is most welcome "

The reception hall was soon filled with invitees and eminent citizens In the centre of the hall, about ten cubits high, facing the east, stood the magnificent throne like a huge elephant Who would sit on this very ancient throne? Who was the first illustrious monarch to grace this throne? Was it Vivasvat or someone even earlier? No one knew fully the history of this throne All the grand monarchs who had given lustre to this golden throne had already returned to the womb of Time, but there was no doubt that each monarch had left a deep and permanent impression of his feats on it That throne was a living testimony of their continuing valour Its arm rests were carved with two open mouthed leonine visages Its back was about six cubits high The entire throne was lavishly carved with creepers that twined like the pollen cups of the *gurhal* flower It was the proud symbol of the glory of Kaurava royalty and the Solar dynasty prior to the Kauravas A symbol to maintain whose honour thousands of brave warriors had shed copious streams of their blood in every corner of Aryavarta The kings of Aryavarta bowed their heads in front of this throne, respectfully and humbly offering puja to royal valour How many glorious kings had adorned this throne with their splendid physiques—Vivasvat, Manu, Pururavas, Nahusha, Yayati, Puru, Ahamyati,

Devatithi, Antyanara, Ilila, Dushyanta, Bharata, Suhotra, Hastin, Ajamidha, Samvirana, Kuru, Anashvana, Parishravas, and mighty Shantanu. It was a grand tradition of one magnificent maharaja out-doing another. All sparks of a divine conflagration. Maharaja Nahusha had defeated even Indra, king of the gods, and forced him to pay homage before the throne. Anyone who faced the throne felt his head automatically bowing in respect. The throne was a visible proof of the stone inscription—no, the gold lettering—of the glory of the Solar dynasty. The reception hall was, you might say, a veritable springtime of grandeur. And why not? Grandeur is a servant who walks behind achievement. At the back of the throne, facing the east, was the insignia of the Solar dynasty—an image of the Sun-God, in a circular design, fashioned by pouring pure liquid gold on blue stone. On all sides of the circle, like the rays streaming in all ten directions, were gold bands raised on blue stone. Seeing the glittering art work, one got the impression that the Sun-God had personally descended from the sky and was standing on the blue stone in order to support the throne. The throne towered on an elevation above all the other seats. On both sides of the throne were seats for the Maharani, the royal guru, Bhishma, the general, the royal priest, and the chief minister. Flanking the throne, in front, were innumerable other seats for the invited kings from neighbouring countries and the warriors and nobles of Hastinapura. The stone pillars of the reception hall were decorated with carved flowers and creepers and engraved figures in different postures. On the pure white stone flooring were spread soft silk carpets from Gandhara and Kamboja. On all sides were large windows to allow free circulation of air. There were separate areas for the royal ladies, screened always by shimmering fine-cloth curtains. No matter how insensitive a man might be, he could not but fail to be spellbound by the awe-inspiring spectacle of the throne facing him in the royal hall.

The hall was packed to capacity. The Keeper of the Horses, the Treasurer, the General and others settled in their seats. I, Duryodhana, and Shon entered the hall together, where all the brothers of Duryodhana were sitting, along with Yudhishthira and the Pandavas. Drona was ensconced in the seat for the royal guru, and behind him was Uncle Shakuni. Ashvatthaman was with the princes. All were whispering among themselves, and a concord of sounds filled the hall. We three sat in our seats. Only the seats of

Maharaja Dhritarashtra, the Queen Mother Gandhari, Grandsire Bhishma and Gurudeva Vidura were still empty. Swirls of incense smoke from a corner joss-stick filled the hall with heady fragrance. Ashvatthaman kept glancing in my direction and smiling quietly. Two things about the hall struck me: one, the happy, innocent face of Ashvatthaman, and two, the golden image of the Sun-God emblem of the Kauravas. I concentrated my eyes on the image. Resting my right elbow on the arm of the seat, and cupping my chin in my palm, I stared at the Sun-God, drinking in its fascination to my heart's content. For a moment I felt that I was on the bank of the Ganga itself. The whispering people in the hall were like the murmuring waves of the Ganga. I gazed at the image with intense emotion. A pleasing fancy began criss-crossing my mind. Wasn't it true that each illustrious raja of the Solar dynasty was nothing but a dynamic, flaming ray of the undying, solar conflagration? I tried to visualise all the rajas in the image before me. Never-seen-before-and-yet-familiar, each royal visage emanated from the image. Each royal body glowed with a golden-yellow lustre. I had never seen such a wonderfully divine spectacle before. I was enchanted. In the meantime, Duryodhana nudged me hard. My vision snapped, I jerked my attention towards him. He raised his eyebrows, and gestured with his eyes towards Yudhishthira, who was facing him. So I turned to look at Yudhishthira. Forgetting himself, he was fixedly gazing at my feet. I quickly hid my feet under my seat. Startled, he looked at me. A small frown crossed his majestic forehead. In the meantime a loud voice announced: "Ornament-of-the-Kaurava-dynasty, raja-of-the-Kauravas Maharaja Dhritarashtra!"

Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Maharani Gandhari Devi, Grandsire Bhishma, and Gurudeva Vidura—these four entered the hall by a special door. All rose to greet them. I rose too. On the Maharaja raising his sceptre, all resumed their seats. Grandsire Bhishma and Gurudeva Vidura's presence created an immediate silence in the hall. The minister Vrishavarman stood up and said:

"Venerable Grandsire, Ornament-of-the-Kaurava-dynasty Maharaja, Maharani, respectworthy Gurudeva Drona and Vidura, Queen Mother Kunti Devi, Raja-of-the Subalas Uncle Shakuni, Commander-in-Chief, Council-of-Eight Ministers, Finest-of-Kauravas Prince Yudhishthira and Duryodhana, Raja-of-Anga Karna, Son-of-the-guru Ashvatthaman, all princes pre-

sent and invited citizens, you are all aware why this royal assembly has been invited today The finest of the Yadavas, Maharaja Sri Krishna has killed his tyrant maternal uncle Kansa and established his royal authority in Mathura Maharaja Sri Krishna is the nephew of Queen Mother Kunti, who is the wife of the finest-of the-Kauravas, Maharaja Pandu You know this well too His victory has provided us Kauravas with an excellent ally who is also bound to us by the dutiful ties of kinship This is extremely fortunate for us We have gathered to convey our congratulations and express our happiness on this occasion The finest-of-Kauravas, Grandsire Bhishma, will now say a few words about the Yadava-raja, Maharaja Sri Krishna " Bowing twice, Vrishavarman sat down

All eyes were turned to Grandsire Bhishma I recalled my first meeting with him on the bank of the Ganga He had said to me then "Take care of your flesh-ear-rings Go " Remembering these words, I touched my ear-rings None else in the hall had such ear-rings This fact struck me strongly He stood up and expressed himself in a grave voice, as if an erect, tall deodar were speaking There was not the slightest stoop in his tall figure, despite his years His voice was as sharp and ringing as the impact of arrow on stone-slab He cast his old yet penetrating gaze on the silent audience and said

"Members of this royal assembly and excellent heroes of the Kauravas! My mind today is overflowing like the Yamuna in flood with all kinds of mixed feelings What is there for me to say about Bhagavan Sri Krishna? I use the word 'Bhagavan' and that should be enough to show you my feelings about him Yet I do feel that it is my duty, as an elder Kaurava, to say a few words to the young generation I see before me, the reason being that we sometimes completely forget the supremacy of discipline in life, so that it becomes necessary to say in simple language something about Sri Krishna that will appeal to your brave and heroic natures Please give me your undivided attention

"Sri Krishna is a thousand-petalled, hundred-hued lotus Take any petal—its soft feel and soothing hue will provide you with a divine joy Sri Krishna, who is today a raja, appears before my eyes in any number of forms I have seen him many times And whenever I have heard of incidents concerning him from the lips of others, I have always felt them to be happening right in front of

me In fact, they happen to me with the very same vividness with which I see you in front of me now in this royal hall It is possible that I may have forgotten some of the incidents in my life's career, but I am positive that I have not forgotten even a single incident in the life of Krishna You may feel astounded by the fact that Sri Krishna has killed Kansa, but I don't The truth is that I see no reason even to extend our auspicious greetings to Sri Krishna Yet I have thought fit to invite you here, only for one reason, which is that I want to speak about him to you I must warn all the heroes here that if their intention is to measure Sri Krishna with the brilliance of their brains, they will certainly fail To measure him you must look up at the immensity of the sky And in course of time you will realise that even the sky, compared to him, is infinitesimal Please do not get the impression that I am rambling inconsequentially under the sway of my emotions At the very start I described Sri Krishna with respect and bhakti as Bhagavan—but I did this not without discrimination "

Saying this, he sat down, leaving the audience awed

Next rose Vidura, looking as happy and calm as a *parijata* tree He had a sweet message to impart, a message that incirculated through the hall like a graceful fish swimming in a large bowl He said

"You have heard a great deal about Sri Krishna What is there left for me to add? Yet I would like to say that I do not care a jot about what the world thinks—I happen to be an ardent devotee of Sri Krishna A devotee has nothing to say about his god He is content to worship his god in the temple of his heart Language seems too trivial to a devotee to express his feelings " With these words, he resumed his seat

Dhritarashtra stood up In a wheezy voice he said, "I have never laid eyes on Sri Krishna, and it is not possible for me to do so But Vidura has told me a great deal about him As I listened, I regretted sometimes that I was sightless If by any chance of divine grace I have my eyesight restored, my first task will be to visit Mathura That is all I have to say about Sri Krishna " He sat down, wiping a tear from his eye with the end of his shawl

After him, Guru Drona, Uncle Shakuni, the Commander-in-Chief and other venerable dignitaries gave their views one by one All presented Sri Krishna in some extraordinary aspect or other of Sri Krishna My curiosity kept growing For a moment I felt like

going to Mathura and seeing Sri Krishna in person, who had at such a young age succeeded in endearing himself to such a large number of people. If possible, I would like to talk to him. I was lost in these thoughts when I heard the eldest Pandava, Yudhishthira, say gently:

"Grandsire, Ministers, Uncle Vidura, and Maharaja— all have clearly said all there is to say, so what do I say now? Sri Krishna is also our maternal cousin. We will faithfully follow his and your advice."

On his sitting down, Prince Duryodhana rose. Confidently he swivelled his neck right and left and said:

"Raja Sri Krishna has been fulsomely portrayed in this hall already. All I have to say is this—let the Minister immediately arrange to send to Mathura a golden crown, a silver-handled sword, and zari vestures on behalf of the Kauravas; this should be done today itself. And I will now request the Raja of Anga, Karna, to say a few words."

He glanced at me, smiled, and sat down. He had asked me to speak without consulting me. There was no escape now—I had to say whatever came to my mind. Whatever I knew about Sri Krishna was based on hearsay. I had never seen him personally. I rose to speak. I glanced once at the Kaurava emblem of the Sun-God and then, just as in autumn a flock of unfamiliar birds appears in the sky apparently out of nowhere, unexpected clusters of thoughts suddenly crowded into my mind. I said loudly:

"I have not seen Sri Krishna even once, but I will speak because my best friend Duryodhana has asked me to do so. It is not necessary to know Sri Krishna fully in order to say something about him. One can easily get to know the basics about a person from the events in which he is involved. You have already announced that Sri Krishna has despatched the brutal tyrant Kansa to the realm of Yama; if so, then all I can say is that he is now the foremost raja of Aryavarta. In the tussle of truth and untruth, he has sacrificed his own relative for the welfare of his kingdom. He is so total, so vast that we should take him as our model. That is why I honour Sri Krishna." Loud clapping greeted my words. I sat down.

A golden crown, a sword, and royal vestures were brought into the hall on a *thali.* All agreed that the Minister should take them to Mathura. The hall emptied. The people filed out. I glanced at the

Pandavas seated facing me Bhima was staring at me Arjuna was gazing wide-eyed at my flesh-ear-rings, and Yudhishthira still looking at my feet In a short time, only Shon, I and Duryodhana were left in the hall We were the last to leave

The staircase exit of the royal ladies enclosure was on the right of the hall The ladies were descending and we saw the Queen Mother Kunti Devi coming down as we were leaving She was dressed in pure-white—the white of the *ananta* flower She was descending the stairs very slowly When my gaze met hers, she stopped I thought she looked at my ear rings Perhaps she had liked all that I had said about Sri Krishna, who was her brother's son Her face gave me the impression that she wanted to tell me something I paused, briefly But Duryodhana took my arm and gently pushed me ahead He said, "Karna, today you spoke superbly I enjoyed your talk immensely Come, let's go to my palace Let's have some fruit to eat, after which you can leave " I walked with him Many ideas were whirling in my head regarding Sri Krishna The Pandavas were related to him I had no kinship of any kind with him I felt sad that I had not even seen him

13

That night I learnt a remarkable fact about the Queen Mother Kunti Devi from the lips of Vrishali Curious about the proceedings of the royal assembly, and at the request of Duryodhana's sister Duhshala, Vrishali had gone to the ladies' enclosure Seeing her, the Queen Mother sent a maid and had her brought and seated beside her She caressed Vrishali's back lovingly Vrishali *pranama ed* her She sat beside the Queen Mother till the proceedings ended Next to her sat Duhshala Devi She kept asking Vrishali questions Because the Queen Mother was beside her, Vrishali replied to all these softly Duhshala Devi asked one particularly touching question, I was very eager to know what it was, and Vrishali's reply to it But Vrishali was not willing to repeat it "I feel shy," she said I tried all kinds of roundabout ways I flattered, I pleaded To no avail She was adamant The fact is, it is the hardest thing in the world to get a woman to give out her heart's secret by insisting that she do so A woman's heart is the deepest immeasurable depth in the world There is only one sure way to worm out a secret from her heart, and that is to give

her the impression that the secret has no value for us That immediately brings to us whatever we long to hear— sometimes with spicy details added

Vrishali didn't tell me the question because my excessive zeal showed She hedged and hemmed A woman's mind is like the planet Svati that heralds the fall of auspicious rain When needed, no rain falls, when not needed, a downpour

I knew Vrishali would disclose the question sooner or later

14

The fulfilment of marriage lies in the birth of a son Seeing a son's face, a father feels his life as fully favoured He experiences a truly unique joy

My pregnant wife developed strong puerperal longings for hard-to-get fruits and various other things She was very embarrassed by the way I teased her while trying to satisfy her wishes The servants and maids of the palace left no stone unturned to gratify her whims She had truly become the Empress of Anga

I thought deeply about what name should be given to Vrishali's first-born son, but couldn't think of anything suitable The intelligent thing was to leave it all to her Whatever name she chose, would be the best

One thought obsessed me I wanted my son to have flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour How would he look in them? As I did in my childhood?

A son was born, but but he had no flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour Clouds of suspicion darkened my mind He was a strapping baby, but without flesh-ear-rings I lost all interest in naming him Why was he born without flesh-ear-rings? This mystery rankled in me

We named him Sudamana A huge feast was organised in the palace to celebrate his name-giving ceremony I tried to console myself that at least one son of mine would be born with flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour My first-born may have missed them, my second son would not This is how I rationalised my disappointment

Hope is the strongest shakti in life

BOOK 4

DURYODHANA

1

All the citizens feared me. Many had the idea that I was the embodiment of all existing as well as non-existing mischiefs, that I had a massive banyan of an ego, that I had a fierce world-consuming fire in my eyes. I got an inkling of this in their conversations. I won't say whether this opinion of theirs was deserved or undeserved. But is he really a wrong-doer whom the world describes as wrong-doer? Is there anyone who can say anything about such a person with dead certainty? I can definitely say that these are untrue and foolish speculations concocted by cowardly and irresponsible individuals. The reason being that the same deed which is today extolled as noble is tomorrow decried as infamous. And that is a correct judgment. For example, take the case of murder. Say a patriot kills a traitor of his country. This murderer is honoured by the world as a national hero. He is praised to the skies. But if a bandit, out of greed for wealth, slaughters a traveller with an axe, the world condemns him as a murderer. The deed is the same: one human has killed a fellow-human. Yet the first is revered as a patriot, the second reviled as a criminal. From one point of view, the deed is noble; from another, condemnable. Both statements are correct. That is why I believe that "noble" and "mean" are mental fabrications. Cowardly weaklings, to cover their spinelessness, keep citing these views as suits them. This crazy world has elevated these views as ideal for thousands of years. According to me, there is only nobility in the world. There is only one idea that is eternal. This world has bowed always only to one thing—one noble value—and that is pragmatism. Without pragmatism, a man is like a tree without a root, or a sword without a hilt. To be pragmatic means not merely to be physically strong but to be intelligent and powerful in a perfect blend. That is the kind of practical effectiveness which I recommend. With this philosophy a splendidly determined man can rip open the sky, scoop out the hoard of starry diamonds and rubies, and bring them on earth. I

offered puja to such a philosophy And that was the reason the world thought I was proud and egocentric All Hastinapura mocked me behind my back That's what cowards do, anyway I *am not going to scream to the world that I am not proud,* because—what's the use?—no one is going to believe me What do crawling insects on the earth know about the freely sky-coursing cloud-king? People call me proud and self centred Let them I couldn't care less I know only too well that this world brands very soon as coward and weakling anyone who allows himself to be influenced into doing what the world desires What should be the ideal way of behaving for a man? As his nature dictates? There's a lot of idle talk about disciplining the atman, but the truth is that every person actually acts according to his or her nature And why not?—it is natural Does a lion have to explain to his cubs how to catch deer? Has anyone seen a lion indulging in such instruction? And the same applies to human beings A man should be like a musth elephant He should have such strength in his head when the need arises to challenge the world as will make the world sit up And what's wrong in this? How can a man be a man if he has no masculine essence? Self-control, fortitude, liberality, renunciation, submission—these and other virtues are empty words heard as one sits on the smooth, elegant floors of temples, smelling scented joss sticks They are all meaningless myths, because life is not a temple of that kind It's a sacrificial altar which is eternally *lit It's an endless battlefield reverberating with the din of pulsing* life and death There's only one value on the battlefield—to be practical, to be brave through one's own capability Only those who have a mission understand this Those who believe in letting things remain as they are do not believe in this On the contrary, they are always involved in philosophical hair splitting I have all my life determinedly practised the philosophy of pragmatism and courage No matter what happens, I will carry on following this principle Let the citizens describe this as noble or mean, let them call me Duryodhana the Wicked Warrior, or Suyodhana the Noble Warrior as they call Yudhishthira I have no time to think of these details And no raja should have time for such niceties either

My pink eyes were another important point of criticism All discussed my pink eyes They had the impression that my pink eyes would one day disintegrate the world No one said this to my face If anyone ever dared, I would have given him a straight reply You're just envious '

Have there been no other pink-eyed people in this world before? And have they destroyed the world? Had they done so, how is it that you survived? The truth is that pink eyes are an index of good looks. They didn't have pink eyes themselves, so they were critical of mine behind my back. What is this if not envy? I loved three things above all else: one, my title of Kuru monarch, two, my mace, and three, my pink eyes. It is quite possible that I would, on occasion, have had secondary affection for my mace and my title, but my primary pride was in my pink eyes, and this I could never deny. If the royal physician suggested, "Raja Duryodhana, if you gift your eyes it is possible that Maharaja Dhritarashtra will regain his sight," my reply would be, "Royal physician, if Maharaja Dhritarashtra's sight depends on the gift of my eyes, I will part with them because I have no choice, but the moment I hand them over, I will detach my head from my body with my other hand. Without his eyes, Duryodhana is no better than a stump of wood. My uniqueness lies in my pink eyes, and that is why I am so proud of them."

2

I was a prince. The glory of Hastinapura—of all Aryavarta—lay in my hands. Chariots so swift they shamed storms were at my service. Who will ride chariots if not a raja? I had sky kissing, luxuriously appointed palaces to live in. Whenever I wanted, I could enjoy the subtlest, the finest cuisine. When exhausted to breaking point, I had for my entertainment dancing girls so graceful they surpassed even the apsaras of heaven, as well as courtesans and songstresses. If anyone still dared to say anything against me, I was the crown prince and I had the royal power to crush him to powder. I was the absolute lord of Hastinapura. Not one, not two, I had ninetynine immensely powerful brothers. I had an excellent adviser in Uncle Shakuni, who was most skilful and intelligent. To carry out every order of mine, I had a veritable chain of followers ranging from the minister Vrishavarman to the humblest menial. Because father was sightless, and Grandsire Bhishma advanced in years, I had all the reins of government in my hands. For about seventeen years the entire administration of Hastinapura had been managed by me. My closest friends, such as Karna, sometimes plucked up courage to ask me, "Duryodhana, what did you accomplish in these seventeen years?" They forgot

that seventeen years was a negligible period by which to judge the running of the entire Kaurava empire I had committed myself to enhancing the prestige of the Kauravas during these seventeen years, and yet people complained that I had been behaving arbitrarily If what they said was right, what could I do except agree with them? "Very well, I have behaved arbitrarily What else do you have to say about this?" Why should I be accountable to anyone? Whose kingdom was it anyway? My ancestors' If I, as their descendant, behaved as I pleased, what's so wrong about that? I was not one to be afraid about what my future would bring Whatever was going to be, was going to be What was going to be the fate of Hastinapura? And of Aryavarta? What will be, will be But I would behave the same way, because I don't mull over the past and I don't know the future I am a child of the present And in the present, I have done very well indeed in keeping in check the growing threat of rebellion from the Pandavas Wasn't the mightily illustrious, tremendously strong, and sun like hero Karna totally dedicated to me? He had promised complete allegiance to me Though brilliant in valour, he is really a simple man Everyone calls him charioteer, a person of low rank But on every occasion that I have seen him I never could believe that he was a charioteer's son How could a mere charioteer's son be so valiant? How could a charioteer's son have golden flesh-ear-rings that flashed fire? He was doubtless of a high caste Perhaps he himself was not aware who he was If what I think is correct, what will happen if tomorrow he stumbles on the truth of his birth? *Chhee!* I cannot even imagine my condition if that should ever come about

Treating me as his life precious friend, that silly young man has entrusted his life, his mind, and his future to me without any misgiving He considers me his friend, his well-wisher Crazy Karna! It will take you a long time to understand the character of Duryodhana Perhaps—perhaps you will have to remain unsure about this to your very last breath Today I hold you in my clenched fist—I have installed you Raja of Anga I showed you the rays of freedom when you were lurking in the corners of Hastinapura as an ordinary charioteer I have gifted you a kingdom that you would not have been able to obtain though you tried all your life for it I have freed you From now on you will follow my wishes to the letter If you don't, you will burn yourself to ashes in your conscience But I have full faith now that you will never do

anything that goes against my interest You see, I have made you the raja you are I have taken a charioteer and made him a king of a sovereign land—this is my great noble achievement On the strength of this feat, I will now make demands on you as I please Karna, you are today a calm and quiet cow in Duryodhana's cow-pen A cow knows only thing—and that is to provide milk to her master The helpless cow never threatens her master with her horns—this I know very well from experience Karna, that's what your position is in relation to Duryodhana, the finest of Kurus You probably have the impression that I'm brimming over with love for you, and that's why I'm supporting you But that's entirely wrong My aim is to pull out the Pandava thorn, and I'm going to use you to achieve this end

They always say that they are the sons of Maharaja Pandu Maharaja Pandu was an illustrious person, a destroyer of enemies, a world conqueror—all these facts I am prepared to grant I have the greatest respect for him even now But those shrewd people who know why he left Hastinapura will certainly admit that these Pandavas cannot in any way be the sons of Maharaja Pandu The curse on him made it impossible for him to have children How then can they be his progeny? They are not his children—if this is once for all clear, then how can I ever accept them as his? At the most they have the right to call themselves children of Kunti or children of Madri And if that is true, then it is proper that they should exercise their royal right by claiming it in Mathura by fighting against Krishna or in the kingdom of Madra by fighting against Shalya Why are they trying to poke their noses in Hastinapura with their false claims? What happened to our dear Maharaja Pandu is indeed a great mystery No one has come forward to give the details of his death They were given shelter in this palace only because of Queen Mother Kunti I have tolerated with the utmost patience the welcome they have been receiving here all the time Guru Drona was the guru of only the Kauravas He should have given priority to our interests But I have noticed that Arjuna always faithfully tails Guru Drona as a calf tails its mother I have also observed that Yudhishthira is always busy giving gratuitous advice to all and sundry I have watched barbarous Bhima entice my brothers on the pretext of swimming in the lake on the city outskirts and then ducking them four at a time in the waters until they were half-dead Did anyone give thought to my feelings at that time?

For twelve years I have burned up inside observing the way they monopolised everything. Wherever you look, you see the Pandavas. *Arre*, are the Pandavas gods or what? And even if they are, I'm going to show them that I am the descendant of Maharaja Nahusha who taught the gods a thorough lesson. These Pandavas now go about openly laying claim to the throne of Hastinapura. Whose kingdom is it? The Kauravas'. The kingdom of two monarchs, Maharaja Pandu and Maharaja Dhritarashtra. But now the sinfully-born sons of Kunti and Madri are haughtily calling it theirs. My mind is entirely clear on one point—the Pandavas are simply not the sons of Maharaja Pandu. Sons they are, but of Kunti and Madri. If on the strength of this they have rosy visions of sitting on the throne of the Kauravas, then I would describe them as gross fools. Water dripping from a thatched hut can never become the sacred water of the Ganga. Poisonous weeds that breed beside nullahs are not placed as *parijata*-offerings before the sacred image of a deity. Stone chips on the public road are not scintillating stars. The wild crow shrieking in the banyan does not ever compare with the king of birds Garuda perched on a mountain peak. What will be, will be. But as long as brave Duryodhana breathes, he will not allow the wicked self-styled gang of five Pandavas to even touch the sacred ancient throne of the Kauravas, even if he has to move earth and heaven for it.

And that, Karna, is why I have drawn you so close to me. This decision I made on the memorable day of the competition.

It was for this reason only that I made illustrious Karna the king of Anga in front of the huge assembled populace. By doing so, I ensured his loyalty to me. Karna is the only warrior who can better Arjuna and who is supreme on account of his innumerable virtues. He made this amply clear in the arena. That day, if Bhima had not stood up and butted in with his remarks on Karna's lineage, then—then Arjuna would have had no position left in this world. Karna would have made short shrift of him in the duel. That is why Karna's sunflower-like golden-yellow glistening body has become my impenetrable shield. At the right time I will, cleverly, place him in front of me. Really, he is a little naive. He is prepared to give up his life for anyone whom he treats as his own. And he now considers me his own. 'Crazy Karna!' There is a shining ruby embedded in the crown of prestige which I have lovingly placed on your head by making you the sovereign ruler of Anga—I hav

made you see the significance of this But it is not really a ruby—it is a pulsating ember It is the ember of your naive trust in me You have accepted it on your head with love I have placed it there with my own hands '

3

Though Karna was indeed on my side, I couldn't afford to give up my distrust of the Pandavas The horrific deeds of Arjuna and Bhima in the arena on the last occasion had robbed me of my sleep

That huge hulk of a Bhima had lifted my dear Duhshasana in the fist fight high up in the air and dashed him on the ground with the ferocity of a washerman thumping clothes on stone And in the mace-arena Bhima pounced on me like a voracious lion *Chhee!* Until the Pandava thorn is fully plucked out, no Kaurava can live in peace I am prepared to do anything to achieve this, and I will not fail My motivation is simple I will get calm of mind only if I succeed

It wasn t possible to get rid of the Pandavas in too obvious a way because that bunch of five brothers was like a united range of walking and talking hills Five furious bulls, in singleness of purpose can easily defeat a powerful king of the forest And here I had to face five warriors skilled in the use of all weapons That is why I decided to use a bit of fraud in order to pluck out the thorn Instead of fraud it might be more appropriate to say ' expediency

After all, fraud is known in politics by the sweet and sophisticated word ' expediency ' I had often discussed this with Karna But he had one rigid view 'If you want me, I will take on all five warriors in a duel at one time I will make banana pulp out of them, but I am not prepared to use any unfair means ' This faith of his had truth behind it—I knew that only too well But I never was able to give my agreement to his courageous faith—and I never will I will first try out all the means that I have If, after that, these low-class Pandavas survive, I will finally—at the very end—use Karna as the ultimate weapon He is definitely illustrious, but he is also liberal and kind Whom he once calls his own, he makes his own for ever He had won over the hearts of the multitudes of the capital with his captivating virtues, his most

powerful and attractive virtue being his irresistible personality To have him face you was like receiving an endless stream of radiant energy Why this was so, is impossible to explain A brief look at his blue eyes made even the cerulean sky fade Sometimes, we met accidentally on the steps of the palace when he returned from his ablutions in the Ganga I shall never forget in all my life his appearance at that time Some pure drops of the sacred Ganga, almost as if by mistake, clung to his wet golden hair, they shone like dewdrops on sunflowers blossoming in a garden His gently swaying flesh-ear-rings, his imposing forehead, his sharp pointed nose, his cheeks red like *palasha* flowers, his striking golden eyebrows reaching up to his ears, his arms like elephant trunks, his symmetrically shaped calves, his heaving chest resembling the shell of a massive tortoise in the waters of the Ganga, his neck strong and round like a quiver, his shoulders solid like a bull's, and his round, extraordinarily round, sun-like face which imparted splendour to his entire frame—I had never seen a personality so impressive and magnetic in all Hastinapura He was a man of few words, but his silence was itself eloquent When he spoke, his voice was as resonant as two maces clashing After Grandsire Bhishma, Karna came next in my appreciation—on account of his voice

Whenever he smiles while talking, his golden-shining teeth stand out, and I

I' I forget the gross indifference I received from Guru Drona, I forget the insults of Bhima and Arjuna, I forget the hundreds of arrow-points that continually pierce the lonely corner of my heart I forget the fact that I am the Crown Prince of the Kauravas, I forget the fact that I am going to be tomorrow the anointed Emperor of Hastinapura Only one thought keeps buzzing in my head "Is Karna really a charioteer's son? Is it possible that a handsome and enchanting person can be born in an impoverished charioteer's hut? Is Karna really low-born?" And my mind replies firmly, "Karna is not a charioteer's son Karna is a treasure-house of energy How can a treasure house of energy have its source in a cave of darkness? He must be the excellent, dynamic, patient son of an illustrious raja He must be a Kshatriya And that is why I publicly appointed him the Raja of Anga Could Duryodhana be so foolish as to select a twister of horse-tails and a whipper of horse-backs—an insignificant charioteer—and bring him into the magnificent royal hall of the Kauravas as an emperor? And hand over the respected crown of Anga to him?

Karna has always appeared to me as my unfailing ultimate weapon Until the right time comes, I will not make use of him Karna is the guarantee of Duryodhana's safety So long as Karna lives, Duryodhana is invincible That is why I have decided to adopt a unique course of action concerning the Pandavas which will not involve Karna at all Last night I gave a strong warning to my revered father, Maharaja Dhritarashtra

He really does believe that gang of five brothers to be the sons of his brother I have clearly explained to him that they are not the sons of Maharaja Pandu, that, indeed, the untimely end of Maharaja Pandu was very likely brought about by the wiles of these five How difficult it was to get him to swallow these truths! He had one fixed notion "Queen Mother Kunti will never lie out of greed for the kingdom If what you say is true, she would never have set foot in this capital " My revered father is eminently simplistic Out of greed for a kingdom, men will at most go so far as to declare war, kill each other, place their heads as sacrifice at the altar of the goddess of war—but as for women?—*Chhee!* Women out of greed for a kingdom even go to the extent of destroying that very kingdom, even reducing it to ashes Everyone says that woman is the wonder product of the Creator, she is the upholder of human prestige, the embodiment of beauty, the last word in tenderness, the pinnacle of love, but I think this is all a pack of lies A man can become cruel at times, but there is a limit to his cruelty, because his cruelty is usually directed against a particular individual But once a woman decides to harden her heart, she will go to the extent of flouting many externally accepted codes of dignified behaviour If this were not so, why should the Queen Mother Kunti decide to return to Hastinapura, stained character and all? This is not something that my father is prepared to accept He continues to believe that the Pandavas are the sons of his dear brother What he is not aware of is the fact that his nephews are sparks of a mighty fire, the reason being that he, being sightless, never actually saw the horrendous exploits of Bhima and Arjuna Sometimes ignorance is indeed bliss Wasn't the blissful acceptance of my father something like this? Let him think what he likes, I am not going to take it lying down Time is no one's servant Tomorrow these same Pandavas will become fiercely powerful, and then Duryodhana, like Maharaja Pandu, will have to scurry into exile with his brothers, wearing a single

cloth, satchel in hand That's why I had to convince my father last night that the persons he thought were Pandu's sons were not his brother's children at all

There are times when one has to put aside thoughts of kinship and speak to one's near and loved ones in language that is not very pleasing Life brings success only to those who perform their duty with determination

With the help of noble Kanak I had succeeded last night in completely changing the Maharaja's mind The minister Kanak has become my guru since last night What persuasive arguments he came up with before the Maharaja! Any raja desiring immense power and fame will do well to study thoroughly the precepts laid down in *The Code of Kanak*

At first the words of noble Kanak appeared strange, but after I had given them serious thought I realised how practical and powerful they were I had never heard such insightful precepts before I liked them That is why I have accepted as my guru the finest of political philosophers, the cunning minister Kanak The Maharaja, through an attendant, summoned Kanak to his palace yesterday As soon as Kanak entered, the Maharaja said to him, "Noble Kanak, I will ask you a question Think well before you answer it My eldest son Duryodhana keeps repeating these days that the Pandavas are not Pandu's sons The Pandavas in the meanwhile grow from strength to strength Is there a grain of truth in what Duryodhana says? I want your straight and clear opinion "

Noble Kanak *pranama-ed* the Maharaja and replied gravely, "Maharaja, you want my straight and clear opinion, but it may not please you "

"Why do you say this, noble Kanak? If you haven't yet realised that Maharaja Dhritarashtra is able to swallow the bitterest truth, then "

"It's not that, Maharaja Since you wish to hear me, please listen A faithful servant always desires his master's welfare I am such a faithful servant That is why I speak straight words to you Please do not take them otherwise, and please do not have any wrong ideas about me

"Maharaja, a man should always stand firm by his own efforts The world fears only those who are unshakably strong That is why all deeds have to be performed from a position of strength alone Never let anyone in on the weaknesses of your kingdom—let this

be your main aim. Every enemy will exploit your weakness. Discover your enemy's weakness, use it to advantage, and attack first; or else you will repent. Draw your limbs in like a tortoise and warily extend your neck to know the lay of the land. Never criticise uselessly. Never expose your true nature to anyone, certainly not to any official employed by you. Prefer to keep your eyes closed if that is called for, and open them only when they have the power to destroy the world. Ears, eyes, and mouth—these are in your control—so don't indulge them excessively. And remember that one's hands are also one's senses. These hands have been given to us by nature so that, whenever required, we use them to cover ears, eyes, and mouth. Even if an enemy is feeble, don't underestimate him. The palmyra is a small plant, but in no time at all it shoots straight up to the sky. The nutmeg fruit never grows on a castor-oil plant. A spark is infinitesimal but it can create a conflagration. If you spare a baby snake, don't think it will forget to sting when it grows up No matter how weak and small an enemy is, he will exact a heavy toll in the end. Even if such an enemy professes gentle humility for any reason, don't be taken in by his crocodile tears. Despatch instantly to the realm of Yama any impassioned enemy out to do mischief. Conciliation, winning over by gifts,

placed excessive trust. See that spies are located in your kingdom and your enemy's kingdom. It is not enough to have an espionage system; it is necessary for the king to become a spy himself and see that the espionage system is working. The spies planted in other kingdoms should be atheists, unmarried, and liars. Such spies do not betray their country out of fear of divine punishment or because they are emotionally attached to their families. Loyal and brave spies should be stationed in public parks, prayer halls, drinking houses, roads, pilgrimage spots, crossroads, meeting places, oases. Never forget that a spy is a mobile stockade around a fertile and prosperous nation. A nation should be like a tree—a tree with beautiful flowers but no fruits. Or if there are fruits, there should be thorns aplenty as well to prevent hands from grabbing them. And as for the fruits, they should look ripe though unripe, so that eating them will cause anyone indigestion. The basic point is that no one should ever get to know the full truth about a kingdom. Announce the defence of national dharma only when you are able to defend it, because truth is the slave of wealth and dharma is the slave of power. Whatever a wealthy man says is accepted as truth—and if it isn't accepted as truth, he knows of ways to get it so accepted. The dharma of those who are physically powerful is considered the best—and if not, they know of powerful means to make it so. Truth and dharma are slaves that stand with supplicating hands at the doors of wealth and power. If after a peace treaty with an enemy, a person becomes smugly self-satisfied, consider him to be a man sleeping atop a tall tree. Only when he falls do his eyes open, or let us say they do not open at all. The reason is that a treaty is never a total victory. A treaty is simply an acknowledgment in writing that a compromise has been made. Therefore, rather than signing to such a compromise, it is better to defeat an enemy when he is at a certain disadvantage, such as a weakened army, or geographical circumstances in one's favour, epidemics ravaging the army of one's foe, depletion of his food resources, or a collapse of his army's morale. If such conditions are not available, steps should be taken to create such conditions in order to rout him. A raja should always keep these life objectives in mind and act in accordance with them. If for any reason he is unable to do so, the advice of the sacred scriptures is: Transfer your royal authority to the hands of a competent and dutiful regent, smear ash on your body, and immediately proceed to

vanaprastha, the last renunciatory stage of human life. A raja's life is not intended to be spent only in relishing exquisite cuisine, strutting about in flamboyant zari dresses, and roaming in the royal chariot with a golden crown adorning his head. For a raja, and for the kingdom, peasants who grow rich harvests by the sweat of their brow in the sun-scorched fields are not felons meant for forced labour. The soldiers who fearlessly risk their lives for the defence of their country and the enhancement of its glory, like the silk-cotton plant scattering its wealth, are surely not madmen. The red richness of their blood gives a shining magnificence to the nation, their flesh is the fertiliser of the national tree, whose delicious fruits are relished by king and subjects alike. What kind of raja is he, and what kind of kingdom is he ruling, who cannot be loyal to such sweat and such blood? Maharaja, I say this after much deep thought: this *is* the bitter truth, and truth does not exist by anyone's permission nor does it change because anyone wants it to change. It was not possible for me to remain silent, which is why I am saying all this today. There's no great wisdom in repenting after the birds have despoiled your field. You are the greatest of the Kauravas, which is why I give free rein to my tongue. The love of the Kauravas for truth is extolled all over Aryavarta. You are free to decide exactly as you wish. It is my determined faith that Time is the ultimate and unprejudiced arbiter of all human deeds. You will find answers to all your problems in this advice I have given."

Kanak bowed his head, *pranama-ed* and, like a musth elephant, adjusting his shawl, strode slowly and majestically out of the palace.

In the distance a lapwing's scream could be heard in the direction of the Ganga. It pierced my ears. For an instant I thought, "Lapwing! A tiny creature—yet how sharp and insistent its call! It seems to tear the place apart!"

I was delighted by Kanak's words. According to his advice, even the smallest enemy should not be ignored. I accepted this wisdom and, inspired by it, I planned the incineration of the Pandavas in the forest of Varanavata. A man's mind is like a wolf. A wolf never cares for the feelings of the lamb when crunching the lamb's neck. His bushy tail remains erect and proud. Did any lamb ever have such a tail? No one gets anywhere without trampling someone, no matter how much he boasts of his self-control and allegiance to dharma.

I unfolded my plan of burning the Pandavas alive in secret to my trusted assistant Purochana He was ready to sacrifice even his life for me Who but the fire-god Agni could digest the sins of the Pandavas? Black Arjuna's caustic tongue, constantly blabbering in front of Guru Drona, would crackle in the fire and become ashy rubbish And intoxicated Bhima's strong, muscular arms would burn like logs of wood And the widowed woman who desired to become Maharani Kunti would become the Maharani of Heaven in those lapping flames Only after Purochana completed his task in the inflammable hut in the forest of Varanavata would the fifteen-year old fire in my heart finally get extinguished Only the fires of revenge have the power to quench the fires of hatred That is why Purochana kept dancing in front of my eyes I could see his unswerving loyalty for me in the subtle look in his narrow eyes

4

After meeting me, Purochana made his way to Varanavata I told him to be as careful as he could I advised him to hold his breath at the time of setting fire to the lac house, because Arjuna, with his eyes closed, by shooting at breath-sound only, would kill him Placing his palm on a flaming stone lamp, he vowed himself to secrecy—that no one would get even the slightest inkling of what I was planning One might ask why he was so eager to do this even at the risk of his life Simply because he happened to be one of the ministers in the Kaurava Council-of-Eight? Of course not Who's prepared to do such a task except for selfish reasons? I had assured him that after he fulfilled his mission I would make him the chief minister in office Vrishavarman, was no better than a decrepit camel He wouldn't go ahead himself and he wouldn't let his friends and travel-companions go ahead, either And, after all, hasn't politics always been a sort of oasis? Put old and disintegrating specimens in it, and you can be sure no progress will ever be made I'll see to it that old Vrishavarman gets nicely retired His trembling neck bows before the Pandavas and brings dishonour on the Kauravas I'll see that he gets replaced by Purochana Seventeen years of continuous experience has taught me one lesson only too well—in politics we need to have energetic young blood that sees beyond the horizon I needed a profound and determined chief minister like Purochana

I heaved a sigh of happiness when he left Hastinapura for Varanavata From my window I saw him leave and I surmised that the instant Purochana reached the outer gates of the palace he would chance on Karna, returning after his morning ablutions in the Ganga Who knows what Purochana, flustered by Karna's imposing looks, might blurt out in case Karna questioned him, so I instructed my attendant Prabhanjana to hurry and bring Karna back on a pretext of extreme urgency Karna would never agree to any plan to incinerate anyone He would pack up and leave with his parents for Champanagari—I was sure of that His life was like an arrow aimed by an ideal archer—it followed a straight course, as unswerving as one's nose

In no time at all Prabhanjana was standing in front of Karna and he cleverly saw to it that Purochana would not have to face the ordeal of a questioning by Karna Purochana drove away, without once looking back Like an unobstructed ocean breeze

In Varanavata he would construct a small hut whose inflammable walls would be coated with a resinous mixture of hemp, tar, dry wood, and lac A lovely hut, an enchanting hut, with a roof of dried bamboo On a request from Maharaja, the mean Pandavas and their doting mother would go to Varanavata on a pleasure trip, and spend the night in the exquisite abode constructed by Purochana Their tiring travel by foot would ensure that the six dropped off into a deep sleep It was Purochana's job to see that that sleep become a sleep with no waking At midnight, while they slumbered, he would set the hut on fire All the doors of the lac hut would be bolted from outside There was no way the Pandavas could escape from the lapping flames which, soaring fiercely, would take the six sleepers with them to high heaven Like agonising serpents trapped in a flaming hole, the Pandavas would suffocate and perish and become ashes

I gave Purochana a special order when he was leaving After the lac hut had been consumed, he was to drag wicked Bhima's charred corpse from the ashy rubble, cut off the small finger of his right hand, and bring it to me That wild porcine creature's corpse would stand out even in a clutter of thousands of dead bodies I would stuff the cut finger in a small silver amulet and wear it on my left arm Whenever my left hand brushed my chest, that little amulet would assure my heart, afraid of wild beasts, that Bhima's corpse was rotting in the forest of Varanavata

Bhima, you who mercilessly swung your mace over my back in the competition arena, did you realise that life is also a big mace arena? Here also one has to whirl the mace around—and furiously too It's not a straight chariot race, you can be sure of that

I know everyone will say how cruel I am All I want to tell them is that Guru Drona preferred Arjuna out of hundreds of warriors, and boosted him up to the skies—and wasn't this mental cruelty? Who will describe the Bhima who dunked four of my brothers simultaneously under the river waters as particularly gentle? And was Acharya Kripa, who in the arena mocked Karna's birth as low, not cruel? And the countless citizens of Hastinapura, who at one moment cried up Karna as the raja of Anga and the next moment ran him down as the son of a charioteer, were they not cruel too? Who will give satisfactory answers to these questions? That's why I say that you can beat the drum of pity, forgiveness and peace as much as you like, but there's a streak of innate cruelty in every man I consider myself fortunate to get this chance of using my cruel streak to reduce the wicked bunch of Pandavas to ashes

Ashvatthaman says that one day the world is going to be beautiful and perfect I don't have an iota of faith in his words If what he says is true, that the world is moving to perfection, well, I was helping to make it so, in a manner of speaking The Pandavas are not the sons of Pandu, if, after knowing this, I allow them to remain alive, wouldn't that be a slur on the noble name of my uncle? That was why I employed my minister Purochana to perform the pure deed of burning them alive

Was it something wrong I had done?

And so one day the Maharaja spread a net of sweet words and sent Kunti and her five sons on an outing in the forest of Varanavata The detractors who condemned Dhritarashtra as blind had no idea that his tongue substituted for his eyes I had seen for myself how he used his sweet diplomatic speech to solve political problems He convinced the Pandavas with his honeyed persuasive technique that going to Varanavata was just the right thing for them to do at that time

And it was going to turn out to be a real "outing" for them, indeed! An outing in heaven is extremely salubrious for earth-dwellers—at least, that's what all the rishis and great poets say

My throbbing mind will find peace only when those five banyan

trees are reduced to ashes Some say the mind is a fragrant flower, others compare it to an enchanting rippling river, others describe it as a calm blue sky, and still others are convinced it is the refulgent manifestation of divinity But no learned man has ever described the mind under the influence of a burning revengefulness Its fragrance then is so powerfully sweet that it can reduce a man to stupor, because it exhales a poisonous sweetness It can then also be likened to a river—not a river calm and smooth, but a foaming rushing torrent that erodes its banks, and drives everything to an inexorable final doom A revenge-ridden mind is also like the sky, but not a calm blue sky, rather, a sky overcast with thick storm clouds, flashing with intermittent streaks of lightning A revenge-ridden mind is also a bright light, but not a light glowing softly, rather, a light incandescently aflame

From my childhood I had chafed under the greatness of the Pandavas During our mace training Bhima used to beat me with the merciless fury of a peasant belabouring a bullock The lotus petals of my life were ground to pulp under his feet every second All that remained was the stem I was a Crown Prince after all, I had a mind too, I had feelings also But that savage Bhima had reduced my self esteem to dust Duryodhana became what he is in the process of collecting the scattered fragments of his life's petals Nobody tried to understand this simple truth I never had for the Pandavas even the basic human feelings that every human being has for another And why should I? That wild boar Bhima always boasted of how he could push others around He had dashed me to the ground any number of times On the day of the competition he had haughtily ordered Karna, Go, do your family thing—go whip the horses and massage them " Who did he think Karna was?—grass to trample under his feet? That stupid, wicked elephant brother of the Pandavas had unwittingly or otherwise fanned the fires of hatred between the Pandavas and the Kauravas It never occurred to him that when the right time comes even a tiny ant can despatch an elephant to the portals of heaven A small spark can make ashes out of a sprawling forest A single black cloud can briefly blot out the entire sun It is futile for any man to think that he is the only strong man in the world I would show pompous Bhima the truth of that statement If I wasn't able to show it to him by my physical strength, I would employ wealth and intelligence to prove my point That was why I sent off Purochana to Varanavata

with clear instructions It is essential to have such assistants in the business of ruling Without assistants, a government is like a trunk without a head

My attention was focused on one thing only—what news Purochana would bring No beloved ever waited for her lover with the ardour with which I kept my eyes open for the return of Purochana He would be successful—naturally My henchmen were not an incompetent lot

5

Wah! Wah! Purochana! You have done your Maharaja proud! In no time at all your messenger was standing in front of me with savage Bhima's charred and sliced small finger Your loyalty to your master is amazing The joy I experienced seeing this scorched chopped off finger will not be equalled even by the blended lustral waters of all the sacred rivers of pilgrimage of Aryavarta pouring in my cupped palm after I am crowned Raja of the Kauravas O Purochana, what no one could accomplish by strength you have achieved by cunning You have burnt Bhima as one burns grass—and Bhima was one who didn't fear even lions! As I gazed at the messenger who brought me news from Purochana, an image flashed in front of me How did the Pandavas perish? Like sweet potatoes boiling in water? Or like sanctified twigs crumbling to ashes in a flaming *yajna* sacrifice? What ran through their minds at the time of dying? I was sure that they remembered me and hurled abuses and curses at me The scandalous, so called Queen Mother Kunti must have clasped that black skinned sinful Arjuna and together they must have been reduced to ashes Crazy female! This is the kingdom of the Kaurava solar dynasty No prostitute dare loiter anywhere near the Kaurava throne Yesterday you were the Queen Mother of the Kauravas The invincible and glorious sceptre of the Kauravas bowed before you No one was aware of your immorality Knowing this, you shamelessly had high dreams of the coronation of your sons But today—today you are dust at the feet of Death—dust, and nothing else The dense forest of Varanavata has become the funeral pyre of the Pandavas The citizens called the Pandavas lions Perfect! The lions have found eternal peace in a forest And that is why Varanavata has for me become a place of pilgrimage The Pandavas are ashes, and my

always-burning mind has finally found repose But Purochana who accomplished all this wonder has not returned Could it be that he also perished in the lac hut? My mind keeps dinning into me that he must have voluntarily become a fiery sacrifice to express his loyalty to his master In the process of showing the Pandavas the way to heaven, he probably had to travel the fatal road himself as well Go, Purochana, with an easy mind Duryodhana has accepted the responsibility of looking after your wife and all the members of your family

To commemorate your feat, I will order a temple to Goddess Durga, the Slayer-of-the-Antigod, to be constructed in Varanavata, and have it proclaimed as a pilgrimage spot The day you offered your life in loyalty and departed from this beautiful world will be the occasion for a huge annual mela Go in peace All the people will henceforth remember that forest by your name as Purochanaranya

6

Purochana, news had hardly arrived that the Pandavas had reached Varanavata when your messenger turned up with the news that the Pandavas had perished in the fire Duryodhana can afford to hold his head high only because there are still loyal and efficient followers like you Ah, if only *you* had returned alive!—then I would have embraced you warmly at the main entrance itself Your allegiance is reflected in every action of yours Simply because of your affection for Duryodhana you took steps to despatch a fickle she-deer and her five young ones to a fiery death Nor did you stop at that You arranged to send the splendid, joyous news by special messenger to your Raja When your messenger brought news of the forthcoming *svayamvara* of Princess Draupadi of the Panchala kingdom, my happiness knew no bounds Princess Draupadi, also known as Yajnaseni of the Panchalas The glamorous daughter of Raja Drupada! I had heard that her body emanated fragrance A walking, breathing receptacle of sweet scent It was said that she was slightly dark-complexioned She must look like the dark but intoxicatingly fragrant variety of champak She was born out of the *yajna* sacrifice performed by Raja Drupada in order to obtain offspring I shall win her in the contest of the *svayamvara*, and the Kauravas will form a

blood alliance with the mighty kingdom of Drupada. Where can a jewel of Draupadi's excellence shine except in the royal crown of Hastinapura? Had Purochana come personally with this news, I would have rewarded him with my topaz necklace.

A friend like Karna, a wife like Draupadi, ninetynine brothers as strong as Duhshasana, a sister like Duhshali, a clever political adviser like Uncle Shakuni, and hundreds of thousands of life-sacrificing soldiers as total in their allegiance as Purochana—with such assistance the kingdom of the Kauravas would always remain as tall as the Himalayas in Aryavarta. I will use all my strength to maintain its supremacy.

This was my sweet dream. Every living being has some sweet dream or other, and tries all through life to make it real. I too had to make every effort to materialise my dream. Constant effort is the meaning of life. There is no way to make one's dreams come true except by unremitting, persistent and continued effort. Whole kingdoms are built on such effort.

The massive boulder of the Pandavas had forever been removed from my path. The Pandavas were no more. Why even think of them now? Memory breeds passivity. I made up my mind to host a huge feast on the thirteenth day after the Pandavas' incineration and commemorate their deaths by minting a royal coin. The pretence of official mourning was not to my taste, so I entrusted that to Uncle Shakuni. The citizens would gobble the food and belch the Pandavas into oblivion. That's the way a raja has to behave all the time. A raja's life is not all straight-nose shooting, like an arrow. Sometimes it whirls like a mace; sometimes it pierces from the back like a sword; sometimes it catapults stones like a *bhushundi*.

Truth does not direct a raja's deeds; on the contrary, the decision a raja takes gets accepted as truth by society.

Uncle Shakuni transmitted the news of the Pandavas' passing away to Karna. I had imagined that Karna would be delighted, but what Uncle reported to me left me bewildered. As soon as he heard that the Pandavas had died, Karna clasped his head in his hands and slumped down. "Who killed them? Is there a brave warrior born who can kill these five heroes? Is the Queen Mother Kunti Devi safe?" He rained a volley of questions at Uncle Shakuni.

Uncle replied calmly, "It was a tragic accident, they died in a

forest fire in Varanavata. One had hoped the Queen Mother Kunti Devi would at least be spared. But what are we against the will of the Creator?"

Hearing this, Karna kept silent. Defeated and disgusted, Uncle Shakuni left the palace. Karna said not a word to him, but kept staring fixedly at the Ganga from his window.

I went personally to meet him in the evening. Shon informed me that, without saying a word to anyone, he had told Shon about his decision and left for Champanagari alone.

Which meant that I would not see him for another fifteen days at least. He would of course return to Hastinapura. What if he didn't? A doubt started buzzing in my head.

7

Any number of people came to the obsequy feast of the Pandavas. I personally served, with the expected formal grace, five courses to everyone. Some were very upset when told that the Pandavas had died. A few burst into tears. And grieving others started rolling on the ground in front of the wall-painting of the Queen Mother Kunti Devi. Hastinapura is indeed populated by a most remarkable crowd of blindly dedicated hero-worshippers! Let anyone die, and they start wailing. I sometimes have the strange feeling that the holy river Ganga does not take its source from the melting snows of the Himalayas but is fed by the copious flow of tears from weak-willed people. Is a dead man going to return because you weep and wail and beat your breast? They all sat there, crying profusely. It's absolutely true, the masses are mad.

This incident once again brought home to me the realisation that Uncle Shakuni was indeed a very clever, a wonderfully wily person. I had already accepted him as my adviser, but now I must admit that I had to give him my royal official approval.

Saying "The Pandavas are no more", he covered his eyes with the end of his shawl and added, "It is both your misfortune and ours that we have not been able to recover the corpses of the burnt Pandavas for purposes of ritual cremation. It seems as if those pure souls did not want our impure hands to sully even their dead bodies." My uncle's deceitful words touched the hearts of the citizens. "This feast has been given for the peace of the departed

souls If you do not partake of it, they will never find final peace " This statement left them no choice Each citizen ate his fill My uncle was like a walking *bastika*-arrow which never failed Wherever I shot, it hit the target The head of the arrow might protrude, but the feathered part would remain firmly embedded

The Kauravas were the last to partake of the funeral feast Uncle also sat down with us But before I had even begun to eat, a messenger ran in with unbelievable news Panting, he blurted out, "Maharaja, in the southern part of the Panchala kingdom a Brahmin's son has in a duel pummelled to death with his bare fists *the invincible cannibal rakshasas Hidimba and Baka* " A doubt flashed through my mind—could it be that Bhima was still alive? And I couldn't even swallow the mouthful I had taken But I pushed away the fearful thought from my mind, because suspicion is like *duba* grass—once it takes root it proliferates into veritable forest I fingered the little silver amulet tied on my arm and that gave me some consolation That amulet contained the sliced charred finger of Bhima sent to me by Purochana My mind calmed down I ate my fill—and topped it with a saffron scented pan

8

However fearless, I was after all a human being So there were times when my mind was assailed with doubts of whether what I had done was right or wrong A man can easily dupe the world with the power of intelligence or wealth, but he can't deceive himself An image of each individual's real nature is always clearly reflected in his mind's mirror Each person in solitude sees himself in his many forms in this mirror Sometimes these forms are very attractive and flattering And there are many occasions when one feels it is better for some forms not to appear at all Before the doing of an immoral deed, there is always an unnatural eagernees, born of self-importance, courage or curiosity in every person But once this eagerness leads to actual performance of the deed, then, like an arrow-pierced animal, the mind rushes here and there trying to find some stable support or justification Some are lucky to get such support, while others keep searching for it in vain all their lives

What did I gain by burning the Pandavas alive? Was this a

glorious deed to do for a man who was the Kaurava Crown Prince and a relative of Grandsire Bhishma? This—and many thoughts like it—disturbed my mind. Has anyone ever taken kingdom and wealth with him to the other world? Many rajas have been born in this world-conquering Kaurava dynasty. They fought wars, they sent the Ashvamedha horse to every nook and corner of Aryavarta, they enjoyed untold wealth to their heart's content, but—like a child playing in the dust who picks up a toy—a toy that was as dear as life to him a second earlier—and leaves it and transfers his attention elsewhere—they, like him, came and departed. Where? Where did they come from? And what's left of them in the end? Just memories. Good and bad memories, trivial and profound memories, inspiring ones and embarrassing ones. Tomorrow, when I too am gone there will be similar memories about me. What kind of memories exactly? Supposing it comes to light that I had the Pandavas burned alive? *Chhee*! Nothing makes sense. My mind accused me, like an angry scorpion twisting its sting on itself. My mind got all agitated. The smiling faces of the five Pandavas swam intermittently in front of my eyes, and I became depressed. The mind! What if human beings had no minds? Quite likely they would have been happier. But how could this ever be? Man without mind—mace without handle? *Chhee*! So what if life without mind is half life? At least there won't be all these hassles. These and other conflicting thoughts perplexed me. At these times there was only one individual who brought a ray of hope in my life. Ashvatthaman. He was a constant visitor to the palace, along with Karna. Seeing him and Karna together was like seeing a spectacle of a beautiful temple beside the bank of a large river. Karna, with his handsome, strong, golden body, the magnificent river; and Ashvatthaman, with his gentle and peaceful face, the temple.

These memories of the Pandavas revived a dormant question repeatedly in me. "What is the meaning of life?"

I asked Ashvatthaman, "Son of my guru, what is life?"

He said calmly, "King, what life is can be answered variously. But for a Kaurava hero like you, the straight answer is that life is a sword sheathed in a scabbard."

"Sword in scabbard? How?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes, king. A man's body is very much like a scabbard. And his mind is like the sharp sword that lies in the scabbard."

"Amazing, Ashvatthaman That is a wonderful way of describing life "

"No, king It is far from a perfect analogy "

"And the hilt of this life-shaped sword is the atman, I suppose "

"Atman—hilt of the sword?"

"Yes The atman is the hilt of the life sword The hilt has a connection with the sword and the scabbard—and at the same time it has no real connection too But how is the sword going to be wielded without a hilt? Will the scabbard look attractive without the hilt? Without the atman, the body and the mind are similarly affected Without the atman, the body has no value, nor does the mind "

"Tell me, Ashvatthaman, what happens to the atman when the body is destroyed? In your own language, what happens to the hilt when the scabbard is no more?" The memory of the Pandavas still haunted me

"You are mistaken, king Nothing happens to the hilt if the scabbard is destroyed Is the hilt ever inside the scabbard? If inside, only the tip of it is so That's exactly how the atman operates on the territory of the mind It is in a way of speaking inside the body, and in another way outside it In a nutshell, it is like a snake "

"The atman a snake? What strange things you say today, Ashvatthaman! How can the atman ever be a snake?"

"Just as a snake sloughs off its skin and grows another, the atman leaves one body and enters another," Ashvatthaman replied serenely His large black eyes were shining with self-confidence He spoke, as it were, through his eyes "Don't look so surprised What I am telling you, is true "

My curiosity grew Thinking that sooner or later in the course of my questioning he would get trapped, I asked, "Ashvatthaman, you are a brilliant thinker to compare the atman so well to a snake But this idea of yours that the atman discards one body and enters another—are you trying to tell me that there is such a thing as reincarnation?"

"Yes, king That there is an after-life is as true as the fact that you are standing here in front of me—because the consciousness that exists in man's body is immortal "

So Bhima had been re-born! A fearful worry gripped my heart I steadied myself and asked, "So how long will this business of rebirth continue and where will the world finally end up?"

"King, have you ever seen ocean waves? Has anyone ever succeeded in counting them? Does anyone know where they come from and where they go? Re-birth is like those waves."

"Well, what will be the end of this world then?"

"King, leave out the word 'end'. There is no beginning and no end where Time is concerned. Time is Endless Kala. Those who believe that it is Endless Kala—only they can accept the truth that the atman is eternal and, being eternal, is immortal. The birds and beasts, the trees and creepers, humans and others—their atman is immortal."

"If the atman is so intimately a part of the body, why do men do immoral deeds?"

"An excellent question, king. Excellent! First, immorality must be clearly defined. Immorality is a low and imperfect manifestation of the atman. When man is unwilling to tune his mind to the eternal harmony inside his body, out of this discordance emerges the low and imperfect manifestation I am referring to. The world has a word for this: immorality."

"Is pleasure also immorality?"

"Never. If that were so, man would never have received the gift of his five senses. Pleasure is not immorality. But excessive indulgence in pleasure amounts to being immoral. Revolts and wars are the products of such lustful indulgence. Diseases and discords increase from such hedonism."

"So when can we expect the world to be free of this all-destroying sensual indulgence?"

"Nothing can be said about that. We are discussing all this in that period of our life's pilgrimage which we call middle age. There is still a long way to go. If we were to talk about arresting time for our convenience, crores of years will be required to do so. The first really auspicious day will be when man enters the periphery of the atman. Countless visionaries like me spend their whole lives expecting to reach such a sublime day."

"Isn't that so, Karna?" he asked Karna, who was sitting next to him, listening intently to our protracted conversation, apparently lost in deep thought. In fact, he did not seem to realise that Ashvatthaman had asked him a question. He broke out of his deep reverie when Ashvatthaman pressed his broad shoulders with his palm. Turning to Ashvatthaman he replied, "Ashvatthaman, you are a great seeker of truth."

"No, Karna Every human being in his or her way is a truth-seeker You too "

Karna did not reply, but smiled His charming smile spread from his cheeks to his ears on his round, golden face His golden flesh-ear-rings quivered involuntarily, like the yellow pollen pistils of the scarlet *gurhal* flower swaying in a mild breeze

After taking their milk, he and Ashvatthaman left the palace

Ashvatthaman's ideas clashed in my mind like two adversaries "An after life is as true as the fact that you are standing here in front of me " "When a man deceives the eternal harmony in his body, immorality is produced " "After-life Immorality Bhima Atman Snake Lust " These words collided with each other in my head It was autumn, but my body felt as if it was on fire I felt suffocated I went to the balcony in the hope of getting some relief Karna and Ashvatthaman had descended the palace staircase and reached the lion statue in the central portion I could see them clearly from the balcony They were animatedly discussing something In the meanwhile, my sister Princess Duhshali's magnificent chariot entered by the main gates and halted in front of them She alighted from the chariot, and was greeted by them She said something to Ashvatthaman because he was the guru's son, but she appeared to be glancing frequently at Karna while speaking She did not speak to him Ashvatthaman took leave of her, and both of them disappeared in the distance

I thought *Where could Princess Duhshali have gone in the royal chariot that evening?* I remembered that it was the full moon night and she must for that reason have gone to visit the Uma Shankara Temple

I looked ahead The sun was setting in the distant western horizon His long, soft rays were caressing the high palace turrets Staring fixedly at that radiant orb, it occurred to me that I had a similar refulgence around me, walking and talking, it was with me all the time But no matter how hard I tried I couldn't tell who it was I stopped thinking about it

9

That night I gave deep thought to Ashvatthaman's searching insights But I found no satisfactory solution His philosophical cogitations were inspiring all right, but of no practical value at all

I had no time to waste on the atman And what is philosophy anyway?—it is only good to listen to, not to act upon I realised this sharply the instant I rose from bed early in the morning By giving so much importance to Ashvatthaman's intense musings, I was only hurting myself needlessly He said that the auspicious and fortunate day would be the time when man snapped his fetters of excessive indulgence Fetters and such matters—I couldn't care less According to him, Time was Endless Kala Endless or ending, how did that concern me? I knew only one kind of time—the present And I was going to take the whip of Time Present and urge Endless Kala forward with the same passion with which Indra's skilled charioteer Matali drives his vehicle I was Duryodhana, the Crown Prince of the Kauravas I am not a pathetic son of a Brahmin who prattles about the glory of Endless Kala I am not Ashvatthaman I quickly decided to go to Kampilya, the capital of the Panchalas, to attend the *svayamvara* of Draupadi Raja Drupada's invitation had arrived that auspicious morning It was imperative that I take Karna along In a crisis he would give even his life to protect me My brothers Duhshasana and Durmarsha would naturally accompany me Brave men are always ready to stake their lives in order to drink life's honey-essence Only cowards carry on discussing dry philosophical niceties I wanted to win Draupadi in the *svayamvara* contest and bring her back with me to Hastinapura Grandsire Bhishma had not won our revered Maharani Ambika from the kingdom of Kashi for himself, on the contrary, he had offered her to our respected grandfather, Maharaja Vichitravirya If a similar situation arose, Karna could win sweet-scented Draupadi and offer her to me I knew very well that just as Grandsire Bhishma's birth was for the sake of the Kuru dynasty, similarly—and even more so—was Karna s birth for Duryodhana only

"What is Karna prepared to do for me?"—whenever I asked myself this question, the reply came in the form of a counter-question, "What is he *not* prepared to do for you?"

Life is an unavoidable and inviolable compromise I had given him the sovereign kingdom of Anga I had him married to Vrishali after confirming that he loved her in his young idealistic way He knew about this And that is why I was sure that he would do all in his power to help me

10

I had made up my mind to go to the *svayamvara* of Draupadi but the condition laid down by Raja Drupada made me uncertain and nervous It was my fervent desire to make Draupadi the Queen of the Kauravas But the lizard of doubt began scuttling in my mind when I realised that as a result of the strange condition I might fail to achieve my desire I expressed my misgiving to Karna, because I knew there were only two archers in all of Aryavarta capable of easily fulfilling the condition One was Karna, the other Arjuna Arjuna must be somewhere in heaven getting ready for the *svayamvara* of an *apsara* That left only Karna He was the only competent archer—and he was Duryodhana's closest friend, dear as life itself He was in Hastinapura, the capital of the Kauravas I ordered my attendant Prabhanjana to summon Karna

As he entered the palace, his surprised first words were, "King, what an untimely hour for you to remember me!"

"Timely or untimely is something *we* decide Time is always judged by its convenience, but the real warrior is he who turns an inconvenient time into a convenient one " I handed Drupada's invitation to him He fixed his striking blue eyes on the birch parchment His bow-like, curved, splendid, golden eyebrows lifted, a thin line furrowed his wide forehead He raised his firm neck and said, "This is a *svayamvara* invitation I was under the impression that you had called me to get my views on some knotty political problem "

"Karna, no political tangle can be as knotty as this bridal self-choice wedding This *svayamvara* can change not only my life but the lives of all the Kauravas "

"How's that? The lives of all the Kauravas changed by a single woman, and the throne shaky?—it's beyond my wildest imagination—no matter how lovely she might be, no matter how valiant her protectors "

"No, Karna, this is no ordinary woman She was obtained as Yajnaseni, a gift from the sacred ritual fire performed by Raja Drupada Her body is redolent of champak fragrance She was born as the life long source of all fragrance Like the flesh earrings you were born with "

"So? How does she affect the lives of the Kauravas so drastically?"

"If she enters this capital as my wife, as the Maharani of the Kauravas, our kingdom will touch the pinnacle of glory And I will experience the bliss of heaven on earth My life's dream is to make Draupadi mine "

"Where will she find a more deserving partner? Is there any woman who doesn't want to become the Queen of the Kauravas? There is no harm in going to the *svayamvara* A warrior never lets an ambition remain half-fulfilled "

"Karna, do you think that I don't know all this already? The point is that even an archer of your calibre will be nonplussed by the condition laid down for the *svayamvara* by Raja Drupada "

"What condition? '

"Listen The Drupadas have constructed an extraordinary pavilion in front of their palace in their capital Kampilya In the centre is a pool made of stone, filled with pure water from the confluence of the Ganga and the Ikshumati A circular, whirling fish-shaped mechanical target has been fastened on the ceiling in such a way that its reflection falls in the dead centre of the pool The test is to pierce the revolving eye of the wooden fish with a sharp arrow aimed at it from its reflection in the pool—and the bow has to be the immensely heavy Shiva Bow that has been placed there "

"What's so difficult about that, my king?"

"Nothing's impossible for you You are the super-excellent archer who can shoot into a bird's beak without looking at the bird and aiming by sound only I know how to wield the mace, but these feats are beyond me "

"Does that mean you are not going to the *svayamvara*?"

' If you don't accompany me, I am not going "

' What has my going or not going to do with this?"

"Karna, I know that, apart from you and Arjuna, there is no one in Aryavarta capable of shooting that fish Arjuna has departed from this world for ever It's up to you now to perform that feat "

"Me? King, I am a charioteer's son Or have you forgotten? Can a Kshatriya girl ever come forward to place a marriage-garland round my neck? Besides, how can there be any woman lovelier than Vrishali? I am not prepared to believe that there is one."

"Karna, you have to win Draupadi by performing that feat If she refuses to accept you as husband, leave it to me to decide what should be done Win her—not for yourself, but for me."

"I will do everything for you Just as Grandsire Bhishma won the Princesses of Kashi for your grandfather Vichitravirya, I will win Draupadi for you " He paused; then went on, "I will offer the lotus-flower called Draupadi at your feet But on one condition "

"What? Tell me I grant it before you ask it "

"I will take part in the test as the last candidate And after I win, you must satisfy one request "

"What request?"

"The village where I was born—the village where I was brought up—is Champanagari, which is fortunately a part of the kingdom of Anga *You must proclaim my birthplace as the capital* Announce the change in Kampilya itself "

"Karna, you are splendid *Arre*, if you had asked for the entire kingdom of the Kauravas instead, I would gladly have agreed But what did you ask? Your village of birth to be elevated Just that Really, Karna—you are a perfect example of selfless love "

I embraced him tightly He was deeply touched He took my hand in his and slowly caressed it

Ah, who was Karna? I couldn't make out who he was

"Today in the evening we'll set out for the *svayamvara* Satyasena will be driving us—and we will reach Kampilya in no time," I said to him

"Fine I'll tell him to make preparations "

He rose, and strode majestically out of the palace, like a lion

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I and Karna reached Kampilya, along with ten of my brothers Duhshasana, Nishangi, Agrayayin, Durvimochana, Vikarna, Ayobahu, Vivitsu, Vikata, Kratha and Dandadhara A *svayamvara* never ends on an amicable note People even come to blows That is why I took my ten brothers along for support My main hope lay of course in Karna That incomparable hero was ready to lay down his life to fulfil my desire So I persuaded him earnestly to come with me It was Karna who would pierce the fish target on behalf of the Kauravas We were sure we would win We had Ashvatthaman and Uncle Shakuni on our side also Karna's sixteen-year old son Sudamana had insisted on accompanying his father

Maharaja Drupada and the chief minister of the Panchalas, Virabahu, welcomed us grandly near the confluence of the Ganga and Bahuda at the city limits of Kampilya Drupada's son Dhrishtadyumna stepped forward and embraced Duhshasana tightly Introducing Karna to him, I said, "This is Karna, the Raja of Anga " Karna joined his rose-pink palms in greeting Looking at Karna's flesh-ear-rings, Dhrishtadyumna smiled and remarked casually, "Who hasn't heard of Karna? We have all seen his target-pierced-by-sound feat in Hastinapura That incident—that day—is not something I'll ever forget in this life "

Dhrishtadyumna's words were a spontaneous tribute, and they pleased us I was very impressed by Dhrishtadyumna's imposing figure He looked like a *madhuka* tree laden with flowers His face narrowed at the chin His complexion was fair, with a pinkish tint For a moment I presumed Draupadi's face would be similar I could think of nothing at that time except Draupadi

We entered the capital The citizens had spared no pains to decorate it beautifully on the occasion of the *svayamvara* of their beloved princess Pennants and festoons were ubiquitous The main squares of the city glowed with multi-coloured wildflower garlands Artificial fountains had been constructed everywhere The courtyards of houses had been beautified with exquisite *alpana* designs of saffron-water The atmosphere resounded with the music of drums, kettledrums and trumpets Citizens lined both sides of the roads to witness our entry, and raised victory slogans with spontaneous enthusiasm, celebrating the glory of the illustrious Kaurava dynasty I had never seen its equal anywhere Women crowded the roof-tops and high balconies Some pointed fingers in our direction My chariot carried me, Duhshasana and Karna, the other chariots followed behind After a long time I understood what was happening The fame of Karna's surpassing handsomeness had reached the kingdom of the Panchalas ahead of him The ladies desperately sought a glimpse of him, no matter how far away he was Poor Karna, he had no inkling of this He stood on my right, completely unaware he was the cynosure His golden-threaded shawl dazzled in the sun I said casually to him, "Karna, it's time for you to take part in the *svayamvara* Don't stand in the front of the chariot, sit inside and meditate on archery "

He thought my advice sensible and sat inside. This must have disappointed many ladies. Their folly made me laugh. I couldn't understand why they were so eager to get a glimpse of a charioteer's son. Why didn't they want to have my darshan? Or Duhshasana's? Had I wanted, I could have ordered Satyasena out of the charioteer's box and placed Karna in it instead. After all, his family had been charioteers for generations.

We reached near the glittering palace of the Panchalas at sunrise, and the magnificent *svayamvara* pavilion came in view. There was an unimaginable crush of people around it.

"Crown Prince of Kurukshetra, please enter. This is the second occasion today when the citizens' enthusiasm has reached its peak," the chief minister of the Panchalas, Virabahu, said to me as he helped me out of my chariot.

"Who was the other to receive such a tremendous welcome?" I asked the venerable minister.

"Bhagavan Sri Krishna of the Yadavas of Mathura also arrived today."

"Sri Krishna? Is Sri Krishna also taking part in the *svayamvara?*" I asked, a little fearfully.

"That is not in my power to say. But there is no surety that he will not take part, either."

"Who else have turned up for the *svayamvara*?"

"Maharaja Bhoja, Saubala, Sahadeva, Shalya, Shishupala, Virata, Suketu, Chitrayudha, Jarasandha, Chekitana, Bhagadatta have come, as well as Bhurishravas, Sushena, Dhridadhanvas, Somadatta, Vrishaka, Brihadbala, Brihanta, Manimana, Dandadhara, Meghasandhi, Shanka, Susharma; besides, there are Senabindu, Satyadhriti, Suryadhvaja, Rochamana, Sudakshina, Rukmartha, Shibi, Sri Krishna's son Pradyumna, Satyaki, Jayadratha of the Sindhu kingdom, and many other brave rajas and maharajas. We were all in fact waiting for the lord of Hastinapura."

He took my hand and guided me from a side of the pavilion to the palace. The bridal self-choice was fixed to take place in the afternoon. Till then I, Karna, Ashvatthaman, and Uncle Shakuni would have our meal and rest. We had travelled over a hundred *yojanas*. Our royal dresses were soiled and dusty. The horses were exhausted.

I had no doubts regarding the outcome of the *svayamvara* because there was no skilled archer in the list of those who had come Warriors they were, but none of them would be able to fulfil the difficult condition laid down by Drupada Only Karna would once again delight the eyes of all the assembly And in this way he would offer the dark-complexioned beauty Draupadi to me out of the love born of friendship I had taken pains to instil into him the truth that life is an inescapable compromise

Only an inconceivable event could make Draupadi escape from our hands now There was a doubt lingering in a corner of my mind though—and that was regarding one person only—and that person was Sri Krishna

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But in the end that incredible event did take place I returned to Hastinapura from the *svayamvara* carrying many unavoidable barbs in my heart It seems to me that life itself is a strange enchanting *svayamvara* Every individual participates in a *svayamvara* with great enthusiasm, but sometimes Time lays down such difficult conditions that no one succeeds in surmounting all of them Some are so devastated that death is the only option left for them Many individuals are patient, wise, and valiant, yet they are unable to meet life's demands Not even me, not Ashvatthaman, not Karna, nor anyone else

Just the remembrance of Draupadi's *svayamvara* agitates my mind with a strange medley of feelings I have never liked anyone discoursing to me on Kala and Fate I have always given priority in life to Work However, when Work didn't work, I realised the importance of all encompassing Time

No matter how much a man blows the trumpet of Ability, no matter how madly he dances to the flag of Work, in the end when he faces the immensity of the endless sky he will find himself insignificant and unfulfilled Lack of fulfilment is the basic truth of life I experienced this after Draupadi's *svayamvara*

The *svayamvara* gave over, but I did not receive her soft, lovely hand in mine The hand I stretched out for her was heaped by a cruel fate with the scalding embers of reality Whenever I recall the incidents of the *svayamvara*, I get all dejected and upset I start thinking that life is an enigmatic tunnel Wouldn't it have been

Drupada's son, the Crown Prince Dhrishtadyumna, smilingly welcomed us, affectionately took my hand in his, and guided us to our seats. All the assembled kings and warriors rose respectfully. My chest swelled with pride and I felt that all these standing dignitaries were honouring the greatness of the Kaurava dynasty itself. We resumed our seats. All the others in the pavilion sat down. In front of my seat was one vacant. The others were all occupied. Curiously I asked Dhrishtadyumna, "Whose seat is that in front? Why is it still vacant?"

He glanced in the direction of the empty seat and replied, "The *svayamvara* cannot start until that seat is graced by its occupant, because that seat is Bhagavan Sri Krishna's."

"The great lord of Mathura, born-in-the-Yadava-clan, Vasu-

Karna stepped forward, held my hand, and said, "No, no Don't disturb his sleep. I will be back in no time I don't want Sri Krishna to be summoned here I will go and meet him in person "

His nature was that way—he never inconvenienced anyone for his own advantage.

"Go then—but remember to be back soon." I couldn't dissuade him, but I don't know why, yet the fact that he was going to meet Sri Krishna instead of the other way round, rankled in my mind I didn't have the kindest feelings for Sri Krishna, because he was, like Arjuna, blue-skinned Seeing him reminded me instantly of Arjuna

I rested briefly In the meantime, Karna had met Sri Krishna and returned His face glowed with joy We could hear the eager shouts of the citizens from our room I, Uncle Shakuni, Ashvatthaman, and Duhshasana were all ready in our royal vesture Karna was busy changing in the dressing-room In a short time he came out in a blue robe and a yellow shawl The colour of his skin shone brighter than the shawl As he stepped out of the dressing-room, he seemed to me to look like a lion emerging from a cave His face seemed to radiate sunrays into the surrounding atmosphere Seeing me, he smiled gently A charming dimple appeared on his right cheek, a dimple the like of which I had seen only once or twice in my life His golden round face resembled a radiant sunflower His son, Sudamana, walked behind him Despite all our efforts to dissuade him, he had accompanied us here

A little later a servant entered, bowed, and said to me, "Maharaja, the noble chief minister remembers you warmly All the kings await your entry in the pavilion "

I, Karna, Uncle Shakuni, Ashvatthaman, Karna's son Sudamana, and Duhshasana, along with my ten brothers emerged from the palace While on our way, I said to Karna, "I have left everything in your hands This is a very difficult responsibility Please keep that in mind "

Without saying anything, he smiled His gold-studded teeth sparkled His gait made his beautiful flesh-ear-rings sway in rhythm

We reached the marriage pavilion A voice announced "The mighty lord of Hastinapura, the most excellent Kaurava, Dhritarashtra's son, the Crown Prince Duryodhana!"

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"The great lord of Mathura, born-in-the-Yadava-clan, Vasudeva's son, Bhagavan Sri Krishna!" Another announcement resounded in the pavilion. Blue-skinned Sri Krishna entered by the main door. With him were his elder brother Balarama, his son Pradyumna, Rukmaratha, Uddhava, Satyaki and others. Not only the kings, but also the *purohitas* and all the royal ladies rose in respect. Karna, Uncle Shakuni, Ashvatthaman and Duhshasana, who were sitting with me, also stood up. I couldn't make out why they were showing such deference to the black Sri Krishna. On the excuse that something had slipped inside my sandals, and pretending to open the straps, I remained sitting. But I was taking everything in with side-glances. Sri Krishna raised his hand and motioned all to sit down. But none did so. Finally he sat down on the seat in front of me. But the others remained as they were. He rose again and, smiling, lifted his right hand and spoke slowly and gravely. "Invited rajas, please resume your seats. The Crown Prince Dhrishtadyumna will now commence the *svayamvara* ceremony of his sister Princess Draupadi." All sat down, as still as puppets. Sri Krishna glanced in my direction, I looked the other way, I had no desire even to see his face. The mere sight of him reminded me of Arjuna, and an unknown pain then stabbed my chest, I felt as if Bhima's mace was whirling all around me.

I surveyed the pavilion. All the small and mighty rajas of Aryavarta were present. So Draupadi's fragrance had bewitched them all! The great lord of Magadha, Jarasandha, the great lord of Madra, Shalya, the raja of Sindhu, Jayadratha, Shishupala—each warrior excelling the other. But—I don't know why—not one of them appeared to me to be as illustrious and striking as Karna. I

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Silence prevailed. Only the whirring of the fish target could be heard Its reflection whirled in the waters of the pool

The massive size and weight of the bow of Shiva seemed to sap the courage of the candidates, and not one stepped forward to touch it They gazed at each other apprehensively Finally, the broad-chested and appropriately named strong-bodied Raja Dhridadhanva rose Casting a proud look at the assembly, he adjusted his shawl, and gripped the bow of Shiva The spectators witnessed the sight of the Raja rolling his eyes but failing even to move the bow The proud king lowered his head in frustration and quickly left the pavilion, defeated

After him the great rajas Maghasandhi, Maniman, Dandadhara, Sushena, Rochaman, Brihadbala, Satyadhrita and Bhoja tried one after the other, but all failed to even lift the bow of Shiva In the end the raja of Chedi, Shishupala, came forward Biting his lips, he succeeded somehow in lifting the bow, but could not control his balance after stringing it With the greatest effort he managed to fire one arrow, which missed the head of the fish The hopes of all were dashed Next came the turn of the uncle of the Pandavas, the brother of the so-called Queen Mother Madri— Shalya, the raja of Madra He managed to fire two arrows haphazardly Next was Jayadratha, raja of Sindhu With the greatest effort he shot three arrows, but all missed Eagerness, fear, sympathy and various other feelings blended to make silence reign in the pavilion An hour had elapsed since the commencement of the *svayamvara*, but the fish target mockingly kept spinning I glanced casually in the direction of Sri Krishna He was resting his right elbow on the arm of the seat He had cupped his right cheek in his right hand and was leaning a little towards his right—a picture of tranquillity Glancing at Karna, I noticed that he was staring fixedly at Sri Krishna s toe

I now wanted Karna to try his hand What if he also failed? That doubt raised its head I was going to ask him only after all the others had tried

One by one the rajas trooped forward, put their abilities to the test, and retired defeated Some kings tried twice, but the whirring of the fish target did not cease The pavilion buzzed with whispers about the grandeur of the bow of Shiva, which had humbled even the finest of the Aryavarta royalty Some rajas were looking at me, some at Sri Krishna, and most were staring expectantly at Karna

drew my face close to his ears in order to tell him this, but he wasn't paying attention He was staring fixedly at Sri Krishna I nudged him to attention, as always Startled, he looked at me I opened my mouth to inform him of his handsome looks, but in the meantime the Crown Prince of the Panchalas, Dhrishtadyumna, escorted his sister Draupadi inside the pavilion A hushed, expectant silence reigned in the pavilion Each person, agape, stared at stately Draupadi as she gracefully made her entrance In her hands was the marriage garland of white lotuses, reaching to her feet With each delicate step of hers she captivated the hearts of all the assembled heroes Finally, she and Dhrishtadyumna approached and ascended a stone platform in the centre of the pavilion Radiantly beautiful with multi-flowered garlands and fragrant with the odours of numerous blossoms, that huge pavilion became truly a *svayamvara* hall with the arrival of the shy Princess Draupadi Dark complexioned Draupadi possessed the silent, magnetic beauty of an autumn twilight

Lifting his right hand to the level of his head, the Crown Prince Dhrishtadyumna said, "Assembled rajas, you have come here for the *svayamvara* of my sister Princess Draupadi, and I greet you on behalf of the Panchalas The condition laid down for this *svayamvara* has to be fulfilled by the hero who aspires to be my sister Princess Draupadi's husband; she will place the marriage garland round his neck She will become his wife and serve him all through life

"The condition relates to a fish target that is hung from the ceiling, visible to all A mechanic will operate the engine to start it spinning The hero who strings the bow of Shiva and succeeds in piercing the right eye of the spinning wooden fish target with a sharp arrow by looking at its reflection in the pool below will be the most revered of the Panchalas We have no objection to his shooting as many arrows as he likes "

He ended his announcement and glanced at the chief minister At a sign from the chief minister, the artisans on the pavilion's ceiling set the fish target spinning The whirling fish target literally set the fortunes of the Aryavarta heroes spinning also Five huge-bodied wrestlers ran to the Panchala armoury and with great difficulty returned with the bow of Shiva Placing it near the pool, they heaved sighs of relief and wiped the sweat off their brows

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In the meantime the lord of the extensive kingdom of Magadha, the victorious hero of duels, strong-bodied Jarasandha rose His muscular physique was as massive as a strong elephant's Swelling his chest, he approached the bow, effortlessly picked it up, and released four arrows in quick succession, but they whizzed past the tail of the fish target and, piercing the ceiling, disappeared from sight Thinking that one at least must have hit the eye, he gazed up at the hanging contraption Losing balance, he slipped off the stone edge of the pool and fell with a thud The heavy bow of Shiva landed on his chest Derisive laughter from the audience accompanied his discomfiture I looked at Sri Krishna, but he too was smiling in quiet sarcasm The next moment all had changed Under the crushing weight of the bow Jarasandha groaned in mortal agony He thrashed his arms and legs in a desperate attempt to break free Blood spurted up from his mouth, drenching the bow of Shiva I couldn't bear to see a respected Kshatriya humbled in this fashion I had decided that I would not take part in the competition, but in a moment I forgot my resolve Upset by Sri Krishna's indifference, and casting an angry glance at him, I instantly rose from my seat Karna like a fool was still magnetised by Krishna's black toe I simply could not make out why he had been behaving like this ever since he returned after his meeting with Sri Krishna Had Sri Krishna shattered his self-confidence or what? Without expecting any help from Karna, I rose and approached the pool Jarasandha was staring skywards It seemed that that raja, with a body like Bhima's, was begging for his life from me That illustrious raja of the entire kingdom of Magadha was waiting—he was waiting for someone to come and remove the death shaped bow of Shiva that straddled his chest A famous duellist was valiantly engaged in a duel with Death I glanced respectfully at my guru Balarama, seated next to Sri Krishna His large eyes seemed to be blessing me Even at that critical moment a strange thought flashed through my mind to compare Sri Krishna with Balarama I had the greatest regard for Balarama-ji, and an equally strong, if not stronger, contempt for Sri Krishna took root in my mind

The next instant I stepped forward Wounded Jarasandha had stopped writhing and was still His every pore seemed to be crying out for help How helpless a person is at death's door! His glory and self-respect are all forgotten He hopes only to live He wants

life The bow of Shiva had finally trapped Jarasandha, who used to imprison kings of many countries in order to offer them as human sacrifice in the dungeons of his capital Girivraja I stooped and lifted the bow of Shiva with one hand The pavilion boomed with applause Like a roaring lion bounding up from a fowler's net that has trapped its tail, Jarasandha swiftly leapt up as soon as the bow was lifted from his chest, raised his arms, and screamed He hugged me tight All thought I had lifted the bow in order to take part in Draupadi's *svayamvara* Some announced my name It was not possible for me now to return to my seat I lifted the bow effortlessly—a deed that astounded many Apart from my guru Balarama ji no one knew that I used to have mace duels with Bhima for six hours on end in the mace arena—and the exercise of my arm muscles was now serving me well My arms were as strong as elephant's legs

Swinging the bow, I surveyed the scene in the pavilion, and approached the pool Standing near it, I glanced at Draupadi She was holding her breath and looking at me I felt the glory of the Kauravas pulsing inside me I would return to Hastinapura today only after clasping this receptacle of feminine fragrance tight in my arms Having decided this, I fixed my eyes on the water in the pool The fish-target was limpidly reflected in it The arrows fired by the earlier contestants had pierced a few holes in the ceiling Some futile sunrays had slipped in through the tents and were swimming in the water They made the reflection sparkle But one could not see the eye of the spinning fish as a result Still, I nocked the bowstring taut, aimed, and released five arrows in swift succession All I succeeded in doing was make five more apertures in the ceiling Five more sunbeams started peeping in the pool I was instantly reminded of the Pandavas Five was the number that always agonised me Not a single arrow I shot so much as grazed the fish That stupid fish target of the Panchalas continued spinning arrogantly as before, mocking the throne of the Kauravas Swinging that heavy bow was making my arms ache Disgusted, I climbed down I thought Wouldn't it have been much better if the Panchala monarch had arranged the most difficult of mace duels instead of this fish-target business! Did he really want to organise a *svayamvara* for his daughter, or was he more interested in cruelly belittling these great heroes? It would require no less a personage than Shiva himself to clamber down from Mount Kailasa in order to succeed in piercing the fish target

Naturally Draupadi must be chuckling inwardly at my defeat Dejected, I descended the steps The bow of Shiva felt more and more like a dead weight each second I had held it in my hands longer than anyone else I looked around to get an idea of the spectators' reactions Sri Krishna, raja of the Yadavas, was looking at me silently and smiling inscrutably The others had lowered their heads Like a fool, Karna kept on staring at the feet of black-skinned Sri Krishna I looked angrily at smiling Sri Krishna, as if to say, '*Arre*, what are you grinning for? If you have the courage, why don't you get up and lift the bow and win the contest?' I threw the bow in front of him, but because of my weakened arms the bow did not travel far, instead it slid along the smooth stone floor and swerved back and struck my right foot A sharp jolting pain stabbed me up to my head My mind, hurt by the defeat, and my body, exhausted by the heavy bow, screamed I looked to Jarasandha, seated in front, for help He lowered his head to signify refusal Even in my predicament, I felt sorry for him The pain I felt on being struck by the bow was less than the pain I felt seeing Jarasandha so disconsolate I thought, *Let my foot get crushed I will not seek anyone's help*, and I closed my eyes The same Duryodhana who a little earlier had come to Jarasandha's rescue was now a victim of the very same bow of Shiva They must all have been upset by this fact, but none came forward to help me My mind writhed like a wounded snake stung from all sides by red ants

Suddenly the whispering in the pavilion intensified One by one, scraps of words assailed my ears "Karna flesh ear-rings piercing the target finest of archers the true science of archery " Raising my head, I glanced at Karna's seat He had risen and was standing straight, his ear-rings were flaming red, but even when he was standing his eyes were fixed on Sri Krishna's right toe I felt like shouting, "Karna, why is it that your eyes that soar the skies like Garuda are so transfixed by black Krishna's toe?" Before I could do anything, Sri Krishna quietly raised his right toe Smiling the most charming of smiles, Karna turned from his seat and quickly strode towards me His tall impressive frame made it seem as if a huge tree was walking towards me Each step he took made his flesh-ear-rings shake His confident, striking gait so enchanted the spectators that even before he laid hands on the bow they broke into vociferous applause I completely forgot that my foot

was pinned under the bow The excellent jewel I had discovered in the Hastinapura arena was coming towards me, radiating effulgence as he approached

Chhee! How selfish I was! I was going to use Karna to make Draupadi my wife What a feelingless thing to do A fragrant lady like Draupadi would be a perfect match only for a golden flower like Karna Karna and Draupadi together would put even Shiva and Parvati to shame! I changed my mind Very soon Karna would pierce the fish-target Draupadi would then be announced as the Maharani of Anga, and Champanagari proclaimed the capital of Anga Not just that—Karna would be declared the commander of the Kaurava armed forces and given due honour as such And as soon as he returned to Hastinapura, the Maharaja would have to be persuaded to instal Karna as army commander The wedded couple would then ride a ceremonial royal elephant in procession through the streets of Hastinapura All this I decided then and there

He was near me in no time He tucked the end of his shawl at his waist He looked at me only once, and his large, radiant, blue eyes seemed to say, "Upset, king? Why did you have to look to Jarasandha to free you when Karna was standing by?"

With no effort at all he lifted the bow of Shiva with one hand, and before anyone could make out what was happening he had flung the bow up in the air and unerringly caught it in his other hand as it fell, like a small boy playing with a toy My mind and my foot were free The pavilion broke into loud clapping It appeared to me as if the waves of the Ganga, which accepted the *arghya*-offerings of Karna, were applauding

Karna ran like lightning to the edge of the pool, and swiftly whisked an arrow out of the quiver lying there This was the identical sharp arrow with which he practised his perfect target-training He strung the bow, pulled it taut, and peered into the pool His eyes rolled in harmony with the swiftly-circling reflection of the whirring fish-target in the pool, searching for the fish-eye His heroic appearance enchanted all the spectators Rippling wrinkles appeared on his bent neck His flawless posture, as he pulled the bowstring, resembled that of a lion about to leap on a deer The eyes of the audience were all on the tip of his sharp arrow Draupadi's eyes travelled from the point of the arrow to the feet of Karna All held their breaths— from expectation, curiosity,

means—the seven musical notes holding hands and playing *kabaddi*. Spring means—a lovely strand of the earthly vesture of Mother Nature caught in the trap of time. Spring is the anklet dropped from the pitter-pattering feet of giggling Lady Monsoon when the continuous soft fingers of mischievous rain tickle her. What's the use? There's no way Spring can be described. Spring is Spring.

Our journey continued amidst all these lovely scenes of Mother Nature. At nightfall, we would halt and rest near a city. Eight days passed in this fashion. Crossing many rivers and mountains, we arrived in Prayag on the ninth day. Prayag where Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati unite! Champanagari was only twentyfive *yojanas* away.

Eager to see the confluence of the three rivers, we swerved our horses towards the *sangam* as soon as we entered the town. It was evening when we arrived. The Yamuna's waters were flowing from Mathura, the Ganga's from Kampilya, and the Sarasvati was swiftly streaming in from Ayodhya. Three clear streams were visible, in distinct separation: the pure-white waters of the Ganga, the darker shade of the Yamuna, and the reddish tint of the Sarasvati. Three different personalities, yet they flowed hand-in-hand to mingle in the ocean, united from there on under one enchanting name—Ganga. Seeing that three-braided confluence known as the Triveni, a strange thought occurred to me. How did Nature forget to teach man the lesson she taught the three rivers so well? Why does man practise so many contraries of caste and false ideas of high and low? Which ocean will *these* streams mingle in? What else can come out of separation and conflict except destruction? Why not man walk hand-in-hand with man, in a spirit of mutual understanding, uniting all varied streams in one flow? But that of course was wishful thinking, because rivers are rivers, and human beings are human beings. Man is perhaps the only animal in the world whose folly makes him dig his own doom.

From the commingled waters of the three rivers I scooped an *anjali* and offered thanksgiving to the Sun-God, saying, "Deva, grant me the patient fortitude of these three rivers. Grant me the wisdom to understand others well. Let no selfish thoughts touch my mind."

Our horses drank their fill, and we returned to the town. We walked back, holding the reins. Some women were also returning to

the town, carrying water. I was walking with my eyes fixed westwards. Suddenly Shon's horse nuzzled the neck of one of the returning women. The cold sensation upset her. She screamed and dropped the water pot from her head. It shattered near my feet and drenched my dress. She was frightened, and her fear increased when she looked at me. She fluttered her eyes. I was fascinated. She scratched the ground with her toe and stood still with bowed head. The water had drenched her body too, and her wet dress clung to her in places. The breeze from the rivers' confluence gently swayed a few stray curls; the rest of her hair was wet and seemed stuck on her face. Her complexion was yellow like the pandanus flower. This was the first time I had set eyes on such a lovely lady. She stood there, constricting her limbs, like a bird in her nest huddling her feathers in a storm.

I was about to speak to Shon when one of her companions stepped forward and, bowing, said, "Maharaj, forgive us. She's so careless! You're all wet."

"Who told you I'm a 'Maharaj'? I'm Karna. Your pot was broken because of my brother—Shon's—carelessness. I'm the one who should ask forgiveness," I said.

"No.... But you do look like a Maharaj." she said agitatedly.

"No. I'm Karna, the charioteer's son, the eldest son of Champanagari's Adhiratha."

"Charioteer's son? Well, she's a charioteer's daughter in that case," she said, pulling the lovely girl by the arm.

"Charioteer's daughter?" I asked, surprised, because how could such beauty grace a charioteer-family?

"Yes, sir. She's Vrishali, sister of Satyasena, Prayag's most renowned charioteer."

I glanced at her. She had not even lifted up her face yet. What could a twenty-four year old military trainee boor like me know or say about the beauty of woman? But seeing her I could say this much—that woman was certainly the first soft gently-released exhalation from the mouth of the world-maker Vishvakarma in his first sweet happy slumber.

It looked as if the Sun-God had spattered a flaming pink pot all over the sky. Why was he so joyous? I gazed at the liberal splash of pink and said to Shon, "Let's go, Shon. It's getting late."

Before leaving, I picked up a shard of the shattered pot to take with me for no reason other than that I just felt like it.

34

Our horses entered the town limits of Champanagari the next day The massive rock-plateau came in view Seeing it, ant-memories began scurrying in my mind's attic Six years ago I had clashed with an infuriated bull on this very plateau, and I had fainted I had such confidence now in my strength that, if a bull were to confront me, I knew that I, through sheer muscle-power, could immobilise it

We arrived at the door of Parnakuti Hearing the clip-clop of horses' hooves, Radha-mata came out Seeing us, her lotus face blossomed, as it were She burst into a flurry of activity She rushed in and emerged with a heap of smouldering embers on a platter. From the threshold I asked her, "When I left you gave me a silver casket Why these embers now?"

Without a word she threw a fistful of red chillies in the embers, and circled the platter ritually in front of our faces The acrid smell of the chillies sent Shon into a paroxysm of coughing She went out with the platter and emptied it at a far distance After five years I was back in my Parnakuti—as I stepped inside my head banged against the lintel

"How tall you've become, *re* Karna!" Radha-mata exclaimed in astonishment

"Uh-huh, not Karna—Vasu," I said as I touched her feet. She swiftly raised me and clasped me to her breast, toying with my flesh-ear-rings Tears welled up in her eyes Wiping her eyes with the end of her garment, she came out with, "You didn't bathe in the waters of the Ganga, did you?"

"Ask what you want from Shon, he'll tell you," I said, and touched her feet with my head She was the solitary Prayag-pilgrimage of my life, she was my Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati. And my temple was Parnakuti, my thatched hut

35

After fifteen days in Parnakuti we returned to Hastinapura No sign of even a bird in the military academy Total silence everywhere, everything looking desolate There should have been the clash and clangour of weapons—why this desolation? Could it be that some inauspicious incident had occurred in the capital? The

tortoise-neck of suspicion raised its head repeatedly. We tethered our horses in the academy. It struck me that the answer to this mysterious desolation could be found only by going to the palace. I saw Ashvatthaman emerging from the main door. I asked my first question as soon as he came within range. "Why all this desolation in the academy, Ashvatthaman?"

"All the warriors have gone out of the city," he replied.

"Why?"

"To construct a competition arena."

"Competition? What kind?"

"Between the warriors. With all kinds of weapons. The final test of our training. The winner gets acclaimed as the hero of Hastinapura. The Queen Mother will put a tilak on his forehead, and the citizens will take out a procession of elephants in his honour."

"When will these combats take place?" I asked eagerly.

"In the full moon of spring, Vasanta-Purnima. The minister Vrishavarman has sent out invitations today to all the rajas. The arena of the academy is too small, so they're building a commodious arena outside the city. They've been working at it for the last fifteen days, non-stop, day and night."

A competition! Eight days away! The final test of merit and demerit! A competition to assess true strength and weakness. Fine. Now Hastinapura will find out who excels in which skill. Now finally the pot of fame of Drona's pet pupil Arjuna will shatter once and for all. Guru Drona is not the only person in this world. The unbiased judge of the competition will give talent its due.

Beater-of-his-own-drum Arjuna! Now you'll see how flimsy is the popularity on which you have been standing. You mushroom because you flourish in Drona's shadow; now you'll see that my guru is infinitely superior to yours. My mind began spinning a web of possibilities. The black thread of what had happened in the military academy obsessed me.

Such contests are essential. Those eight days seemed to me like eight yugas. Arjuna had blocked my progress for six years—not just mine, but everyone else's. Naturally, Guru Drona had no time to attend to anyone else's development. Not one—not two—but for six years he had shrivelled the tiny seeds of my hopes in the fire of his indifference. Anyone else in my position would have left Hastinapura and left all that nourished his ego and walked off in

disgust It was with the greatest difficulty that I had kept my fury in abeyance for so long I knew that in this world beggars can't be choosers But I will show all the gurus and pupils who ignored me that there *was* somebody in Hastinapura—a very much live and breathing man named Karna And Guru Drona will realise that Arjuna whom he clasped to his chest as a diamond was nothing but a cheap glittering piece of flint

I was after all a student, and I needed someone also to teach me by patting me on the back Someone to appreciate my skilful feats. I got no such praise All I got was supreme neglect But sometimes one does see good emerging from evil One positive benefit could not be denied From this indifference I obtained an illustrious guru: I made the Sun-God my preceptor For the last six years I had, every hour of the day time, singlemindedly looked up to him For the last six years he had caressed my back lovingly with his golden fingers. Quietly he had instructed me in all the radiant truths of life. He had filled the hollow of my heart to over-brimming with his divine light.

Gurudeva! What should I offer you as guru-gift if I triumph in this competition? What *can* I offer to a Splendid Effulgence that irradiates every nook and corner of the universe? The only gift that I have worth giving to you is my body, and that I placed in your charge when I became your pupil So what will you ask for your guru-*dakshina*?

Accompanied by Shon, I and Ashvatthaman went to the competition arena in the outskirts of the city The student-warriors were furiously busy decorating the arena The preparations were mostly completed What a magnificent spectacle! It consisted of an enclosure two miles in circumference In the centre were separate grounds for all contests Thirteen in all, and each was glittering with weapons Near the main eastern gate were five grounds for mace, sword, dagger, discus, and javelin Near the west were five for pipe-gun, *bhushundi*, javelin, *pattisha*, and trident Near the southern gate massive tracks for the equestrian event and elephant-combat Near the north an arena for wrestling bouts and hand-to-hand duels, filled with red soil mixed with *takra*-and-sandalwood-oil specially brought from the kingdom of Magadha The excellent enclosure for archery was so constructed that, no matter from which part of the large enclosure one looked, it always appeared to be in the centre A marble platform, twenty arm's-lengths high and twenty long, was erected for the archers—the marble was brought